

2

NOVEL

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THOUGH I AM AN UNEPT VILLAINESS

Tale of the Butterfly-Rat
Body Swap in the Maiden Court



Table of Contents

[Color Inserts](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Imperial Court Map and Relationship Chart](#)

[Cast](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Chapter 1: Keigetsu Gets Caught](#)

[Chapter 2: Reirin Forgives](#)

[Chapter 3: Interlude](#)

[Chapter 4: Reirin Wakes Up](#)

[Chapter 5: Reirin Gets Inside](#)

[Chapter 6: Reirin Fights](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Story: A Contest of Archery](#)

[Extra Story: A Christmas Memory](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)





“Just this
once...
even a
mud-dweller
like me
wanted to do
something
brilliant
enough to
make some-
one proud!”

Hand-in-hand,

two girls join forces.

“If we’re
going to
swing down
the blade,
we do it
together.
Let’s split our
curse down
the middle,
shall we?”

Kou Reirin
CONTAINS SHU KEIGETSU

Maiden of the
Kou clan

Shu Keigetsu
CONTAINS KOU REIRIN

Maiden of the
Shu clan

"I'm humbled.
If I am indeed
so lucky as to
be chosen as
the empress,
I want you to
be my right-
hand woman as
the Noble
Consort."

Shu Gabi

Maiden of the
Shu clan

Kou Kenshuu

Maiden of the
Kou clan

"I wanted to be
a civil servant.
I guess I'd be up
for becoming
the almighty
empress, mother
of our nation—
but we've already
got you to fill
that role."

ONE SUMMER DAY IN THE BYGONE TIMES OF MAIDENHOOD

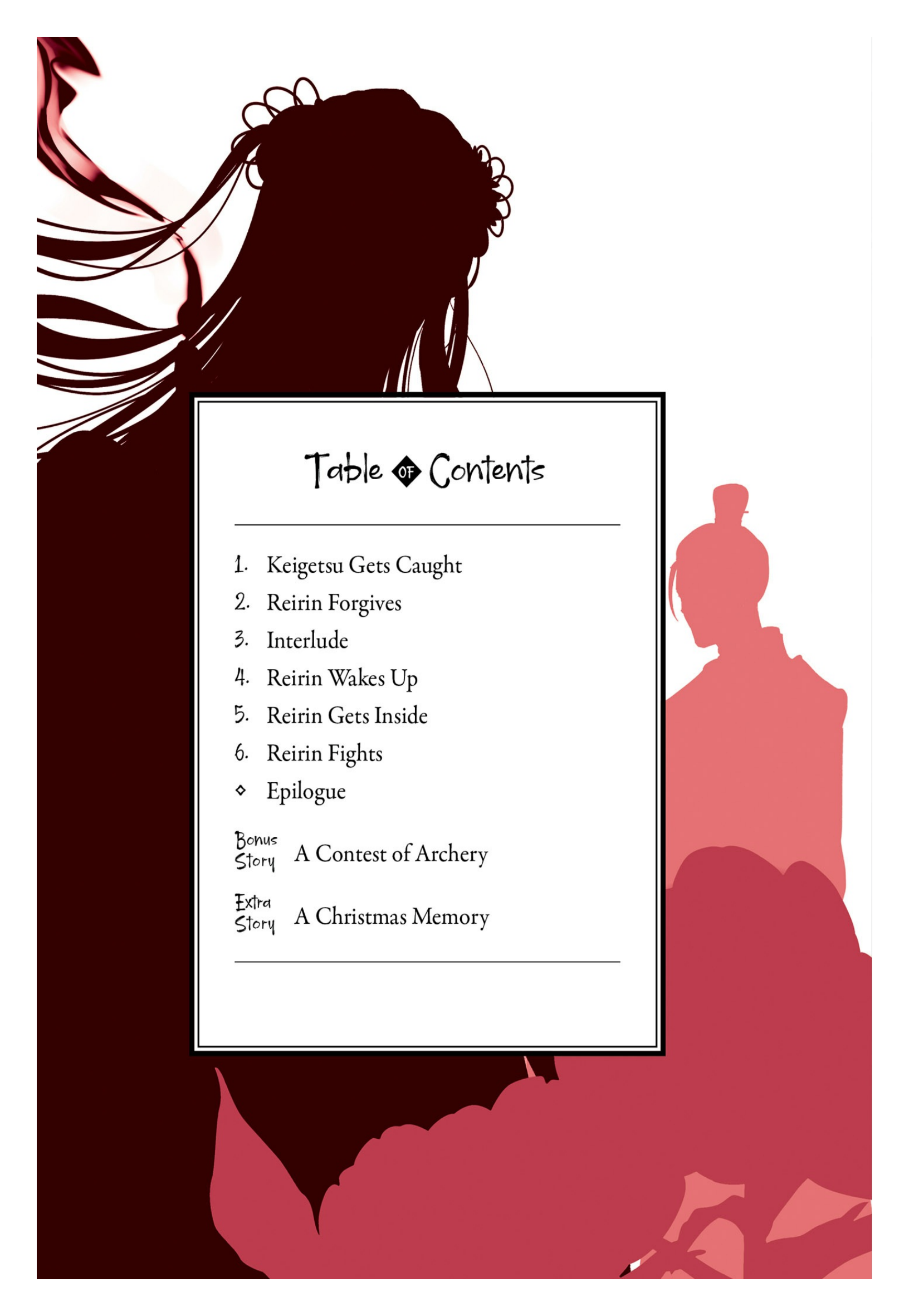


Table Contents

1. Keigetsu Gets Caught
2. Reirin Forgives
3. Interlude
4. Reirin Wakes Up
5. Reirin Gets Inside
6. Reirin Fights
- ◆ Epilogue

Bonus
Story A Contest of Archery

Extra
Story A Christmas Memory

THOUGH I AM AN UNEPT VILLAINESS

Tale of the Butterfly-Rat
Body Swap in the Maiden Court



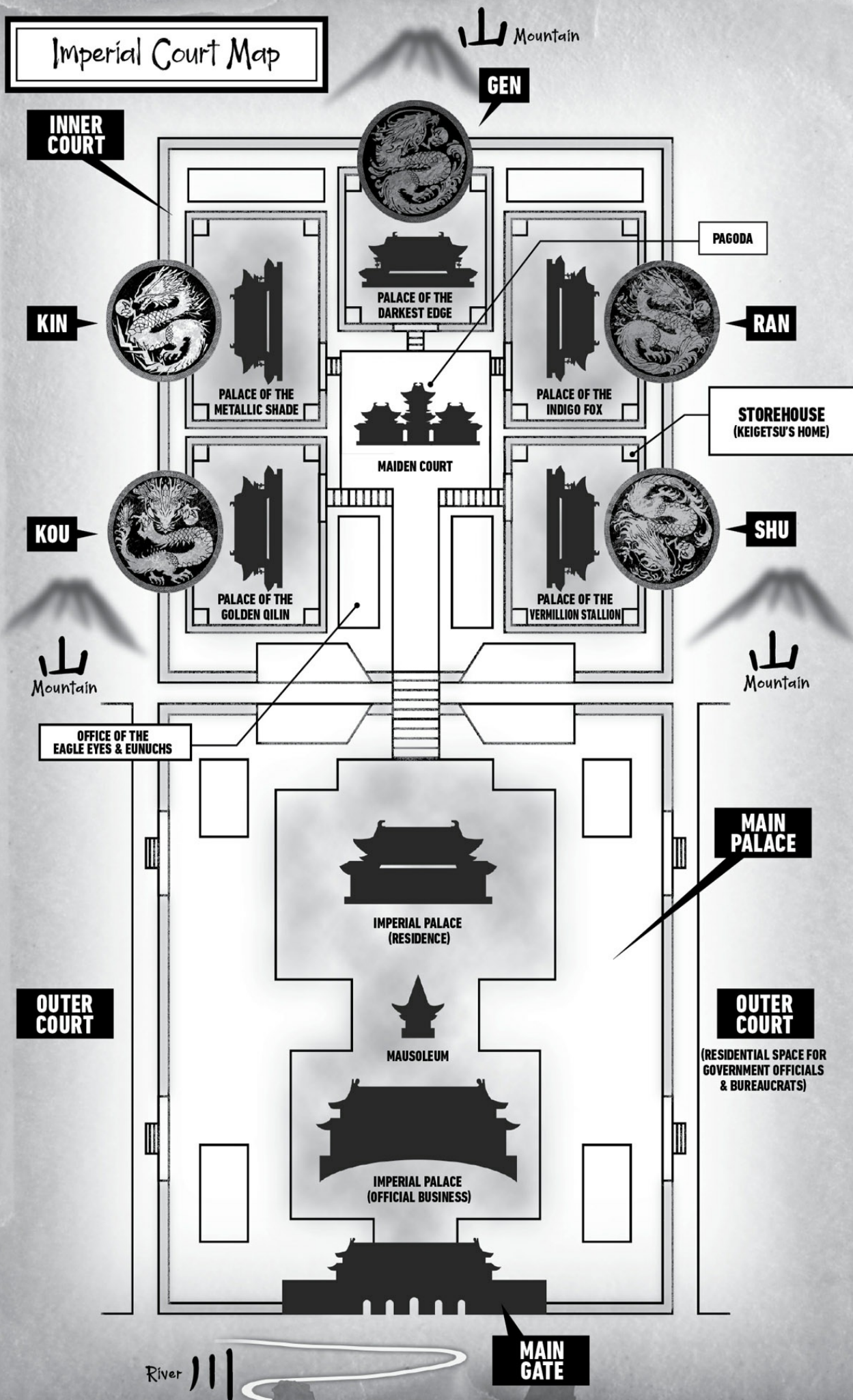
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Imperial Court Map



Relationship Chart

The clan that governs the lands to the west and rules over metal. Their signature season is autumn, signature direction is west, and signature color is white. Chops wood and collects water. Divided into two factions of pragmatic merchants and artists. Mainline descendants tend to be artsy types who prize aesthetic and philosophy. People who can make a profit from extolling beauty.

KIN CLAN
(METAL / WEST / AUTUMN)



GEN CLAN
(WATER / NORTH / WINTER)



RAN CLAN
(WOOD / EAST / SPRING)



The clan that governs the lands to the north and rules over water. Their signature season is winter, signature direction is north, and signature color is black. Dampens (suppresses) fire and nourishes (enhances) wood. Aloof and unfazed by carrying out the most inhumane of acts. On the other hand, can latch on hard to the right target. Many are proficient in the military arts.

The clan that governs the lands to the east and rules over wood. Their signature season is spring, signature direction is east, and signature color is blue. Parts earth and feeds fire. Passive and mild mannered, the majority tend to be gentle scholars, but some have a scheming and sinister side to them.



KOU CLAN
(EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS)

The clan that governs the central territory and rules over earth. Their signature season is the four cusps, signature direction is the center, and signature color is yellow. Obstructs water and bears metal. Straightforward, unpretentious, and full of natural-born caretakers. Mainline descendants tend to have a pioneering spirit and be as steadfast as the earth itself. People who can make it through the biggest of catastrophes with nothing but a "dearie me."



SHU CLAN
(FIRE / SOUTH / SUMMER)

The clan that governs the lands to the south and rules over fire. Their signature season is summer, signature direction is south, and signature color is red. Melts metal and produces earth. Full of intense personalities and show-offs. Prone to wild mood swings and value emotion over reason. People who hate and love with equal intensity.

THE MAIDEN COURT





Kou Reirin



The Kou Maiden. Beautiful and benevolent. Beloved by all, which has earned her the nickname of the prince's "butterfly." Frail and often sick.

Shu Keigetsu



The Shu Maiden. Has a freckled face and wears thick makeup. Reviled by all, which has earned her the nickname of the court "sewer rat." Jealous of Reirin.

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Ei Gyomei



The crown prince, handsome and well versed in both the pen and sword. Reirin's cousin. Has loved her since they were both children.

Shin-u



Captain of the Eagle Eyes, the enforcers of discipline in the inner court and a ruthless executioner. A descendant of the emperor.

Leelee



A low-ranking court lady who serves as Keigetsu's attendant. Violent-tempered, she slips into street talk when she gets excited.

Kou Tousetsu



Reirin's head court lady. Level-headed and unexpressive, but has pledged a deep allegiance to Reirin.

Kou Kenshuu



The empress and Reirin's aunt. Dignified and takes a clear-cut approach to most things.

Shu Gabi



The Noble Consort. The second highest-ranked after the empress. Widely considered to be mild mannered and compassionate.

Kin Seika



The Kin Maiden. Fancies herself the second favorite to win after Reirin.

Gen Kesui



The Gen Maiden. The oldest of the group and competent in all she does.

Ran Houshun



The Ran Maiden. The youngest of the group and a skilled poet.

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Chapter 1:

Keigetsu Gets Caught

HOW MANY HOURS had she been trudging through Hell?

“Huff...huff...”

Her brow furrowed in pain, Keigetsu wheezed ragged breaths atop her bed. Her whole body was racked with fever. It was so hard to breathe that she wanted nothing more than to claw at her own throat, but she had long been drained of the strength to move. With no recourse, she surrendered herself to the unbearable fever and nausea amid her fleeting moments of consciousness.

No, even the oblivion of sleep was hellish. Whenever her soul departed the plane of reality, she was next tormented in her dreams.

She went to a world of pitch-black nothingness—an endless darkness without so much as a single candle to light it. All she could perceive was the feeling of that viscous blackness swelling and compressing around her. Trapped in the void, she reached out her tiny hand in frantic search of a way out.

“I beg of you, Mother! Let me out! Let me out of here!”

This was a dream...and a memory. It was an all-too-familiar scene from when Keigetsu was a little girl.

“Please! I’ll be good. I promise I won’t make any noise!”

Keigetsu’s mother had been a high-strung woman. Plagued by a crippling sense of inferiority, she had always dreaded what other people thought of her, and when that fear reached its peak, it warped into a rage that drove her to torment her lessers. Her greatest fear of all had been the ridicule of her clan. Sweet-talked into the mistake of getting pregnant, she had hated both her failed cultivator of a husband and the child she’d had with him more than anyone else in the world.

In public, she would always smile and say, “I’m fortunate to be blessed with a family, even if we’re living the country life,” but at home, she would berate

Keigetsu and find whatever excuses she could to lock the girl in her room.

“As my personal mark of shame, I have to keep you out of sight. Oh, just look at that hulking body! That hideous face! Whoever did you get those looks from?”

Her father had hated trouble above all else. He had once been an aspiring cultivator—one who studied eternal life and other such mysterious arts in hopes of becoming an immortal sage. Rather than a high-minded man, however, he had been a slacker who couldn’t find his place in the secular world and was quick to wash his hands of his messy relationships.

Thus, he had found peace of mind in leaving home, giving the strained relationship of his wife and daughter a wide berth. How ironic it was that a couple who barely lived together had managed to run up to their ears in debt at the exact same time.

At first, Keigetsu had been abused. But the moment her mother had her hands full scrounging up money, she had instead been completely neglected. That was the reason she hated to be ignored.

No. It might be more accurate to say that she was *afraid* to be ignored.

Keigetsu couldn’t stand to be alone. She was always desperate for attention. Without any friends or loving parents to turn to, she soon found herself conversing with the flames. Much to her surprise, she had sensed a breath in the flicker of the fire, almost as though it had a life of its own. Before she knew it, she had learned to control those flames at will, and, upon realizing this was a form of the mystic arts, she had snuck a peek at her father’s Daoist texts.

Once she learned to wield the weapon known as the Daoist arts at will, Keigetsu changed. Her weak-kneed demeanor turned into a belligerent one. But, of course, that only applied when she was dealing with those weaker than herself.

No one would save her. Because no one was going to offer her a helping hand, she had to go on the offense before she got hurt. Her tantrums and threats were what Keigetsu considered to be an indispensable shield.

The one time she almost began to remember what trust felt like was when

Noble Consort Shu took her in. She alone had offered the wretched Keigetsu a smile rather than insults and praised her magic as a wonderful talent rather than frowned upon it. But that had been the extent of it—she was nice, and nothing more. Despite all the ridicule and harassment Keigetsu had been subjected to since her arrival at the Maiden Court, the consort had done nothing but look on in distress.

Sometimes Keigetsu would go to her crying that she didn't know how to do something and ask for her guidance, only to have the woman huff a delicate sigh and say, "You'd do better to use that magic of yours to trade places with Kou Reirin." The consort would then turn around and innocently praise the Kou Maiden in her next breath, which forced Keigetsu to realize the truth whether she liked it or not: Consort Shu had *really* wanted a Maiden like Kou Reirin all along.

Keigetsu was hurt all over again. Even worse, for all that she had begun to open her heart, the result had further convinced her that there was no one in the world who would rescue her. She was the only one who could save herself. Then what was wrong with using her powers to accomplish exactly that? Before she knew it, the ridiculous idea to swap bodies with Kou Reirin had taken firm root in her mind.

It was *her* fault for being born so beautiful and blessed with such wonderful blood ties and talents. Despite all the comforts of her life, the girl never paid a scrap of attention to anyone else around her. Keigetsu despised Reirin for brushing her aside even more than she hated the rest of the Maidens for mocking her.

This was a sort of revenge. A just demand. At long last, she could put an end to her unfair suffering and see the golden days of her life begin.

Or so she'd thought. So why?

"Huff...huff! Damn it..."

Why was she in so much pain?

She had no idea what time it was. She'd been in decent shape when she'd cried to Gyomei about her forced absence from the Ghost Festival earlier that morning, but around noon, her condition had rapidly deteriorated until she

couldn't even sit up anymore.

She felt hot. It hurt. Her stomach churned. She couldn't breathe. She felt tears welling up in her eyes, but she no longer had the strength to let out a sob.

Am I going to die?

Her ears were ringing. In the lukewarm darkness, a sea of eyeballs snapped open all at once, at which Keigetsu let out a voiceless shriek.

They were closing in. She was surrounded. She was trapped.

The arms she had outstretched in search of an exit were being swallowed up into the darkness.

Ah...

See? She knew it. It didn't matter how obedient she was. It didn't matter how hard she struggled. It didn't even matter if she switched bodies with the prince's "butterfly."

No one was ever going to save her.

Twaaang!

A faint sound brushed Keigetsu's ears as she sank into the void.

Twaaang!

The noise gradually grew higher and higher in pitch. At first there had been a low, muffled *thunk* mixed into the sound, but over time, it gave way to a crisp echo.

What's...happening?

The horrifying shadow eyes blinked shut one after the other, as though afraid of the noise. Soon enough, a great deal of the blackness around her had faded. Her arms were back to normal. In the dimly lit dreamworld, Keigetsu stared down at her own limbs.

"This way!"

It was then that she felt a glimmer of light gather around her fingertips. In that same moment, she heard a dignified voice pierce the silence.

“This way, Lady Keigetsu!”

The light flitted through the air like a butterfly.

Wide-eyed, Keigetsu chased after the glow. She already knew what awaited her at the end of its trail:

A way out.

That bright, warm world she had gazed up at from beneath the mud.

“Lady Reirin! You’re awake!”

Her ears flooded with the jubilant cries of her court ladies, Keigetsu let her eyes drift open. Still dazed, she flicked her gaze over her surroundings. The gamboge golds were gathered around her bed, looking down at her with tears in their eyes. That had to mean that this was Reirin’s room in the Palace of the Golden Qilin.

Keigetsu wordlessly lifted an arm and stared at the palm of her hand. Her temperature was still high. Her breathing was erratic, sweat oozed from her every pore, and pain ate at her from within. But still...

I’m alive.

She ruminated on the dream she’d just had. The darkness and those eyeballs. The vibrations of the bowstring and that voice.

“Oh, thank goodness! Since you couldn’t take any medicine, the apothecary told us that what happened next was up to your own resilience! I can’t tell you how worried we all were!” exclaimed one of the several court ladies dabbing at their eyes with their sleeves.

“That’s right!” said another. “All we could do was put our faith in the gods! In that sense, Shu Keigetsu and her Bow of Warding might have done more good than we expected.”

Keigetsu gulped upon hearing her own name. “Shu Keigetsu?”

The “Shu Keigetsu” these ladies spoke of was Kou Reirin. Keigetsu hadn’t expected *her* to come up in the conversation.

“Yes. All night long, she’s been drawing the Bow of Warding in the name of

aiding your recovery. Can you believe it? Even a grown man would struggle to wield that enormous bow! And she hasn't even stopped for a break!"

As Keigetsu went stiff with shock, the court ladies filled her in on the exchange between the empress and "Shu Keigetsu" during the Ghost Festival.

"I figured she was up to something when she first offered her services, but she truly *has* done nothing but fire off arrow after arrow. When I saw her in action, I felt a little impressed in spite of myself!"

"Me too. Who could have imagined she'd get so engrossed in drawing that bow—which belongs to her antithesis of the Gen clan, let's not forget—that she'd refuse to even stop to eat? I've gotten a glimpse at an unexpected side of her, that's for certain."

Their commentary betrayed a genuine admiration of "Shu Keigetsu."

Keigetsu clutched at the mattress beneath her.

Then Kou Reirin really did save me?

She didn't know what to call the emotion that surged through her at the revelation. Kou Reirin had saved her when she was about to perish in the dark. *Her*—the Maiden Court sewer rat who no one had ever paid any mind.

I despise Kou Reirin, she immediately told herself. I hate her. I can't stand her. That's why I tried to have her killed. I despise her. I detest her!

"Lady Keigetsu... I feel nothing but the utmost gratitude for you."

Despite Keigetsu's best efforts to convince herself, the girl's beautiful words replayed in the back of her mind, causing her face to twist in a grimace.

"You are my comet."

"I won't be fooled!" Keigetsu found herself screaming, jerking upright in her bed.

The sudden shout made her attendants flinch in surprise.

Too worked up to pay their reaction any heed, she went on shrieking, "Do you hear me?! You girls mustn't be tricked either! She's a coldhearted person! A wicked woman who never thinks of anyone but herself and harbors no

compassion in her heart! The villainess of the Maiden Court!”

Her heart was pounding in her ears. Tears blurred her vision. She couldn’t keep her own emotions in check.

Kou Reirin was evil. For how beautiful, talented, and privileged she was, she had never noticed how Keigetsu was suffering. That butterfly who danced around stealing people’s hearts had been oblivious to the rat who watched her bitterly from the ground below.

“Shu Keigetsu...is the sewer rat of the Maiden Court.”

At last bringing her tirade to an end, she buried her face in her hands.

“Lady Reirin?” the court ladies murmured amid the silence that had fallen over the room, their bewilderment evident.

It was then that the head court lady, Tousetsu, showed up with a bowl in her hand. From the looks of it, she had brought medicine for her mistress.

“You seem a bit rattled. Here, milady—I’ve brought you a calming brew. Drink up.”

The other court ladies deferred to the ever-alooft attendant, palpably relieved by her arrival. Having snapped back to her senses at last, Keigetsu chewed on the inside of her cheek.

Shoot. I shouldn’t have let my emotions get the better of me.

Even on her deathbed, Kou Reirin never would have spoken ill of someone else.

Keigetsu did her best to rearrange her face into a contrite expression and apologized for her slipup. Reassured, the court ladies rushed to her defense one after another, saying, “We understand. It just goes to show how much she’s hurt you.”

“Be that as it may,” said Tousetsu, “I’m afraid this decoction was brewed by that very Shu Keigetsu. Not only did she prove herself with the Bow of Warding, but the apothecary tasted the mixture for poison and deemed it safe, so I had hoped it wouldn’t pose an issue... But if that’s how you feel about her, will you refrain from drinking it?” she asked without inflection.

Keigetsu shook her head without a second's thought. "No. I'll take it." After all, she knew of Reirin's skill in prescribing medicinal herbs firsthand.

Who would've thought I'd be rescued by Kou Reirin yet again? She almost frowned at the thought of it.

It was exhausting to keep up her "good girl" act in her current condition, so Keigetsu accepted the offered medicine and bid her court ladies to leave. Tousetsu alone remained behind, insisting that someone had to keep her from spilling the hot brew and burning herself.

Her fanatical devotion is nothing but a thorn in my side, thought Keigetsu, resisting the temptation to click her tongue. Outwardly, she accepted the decision with a quiet nod. After all, what could it hurt to keep such an emotionless doll of a woman around?

A long silence hovered over the room.

"This particular fever gave me quite the fright," Tousetsu eventually murmured.

After finishing off the bowl and setting it back down with all the grace she could muster, Keigetsu shot back a listless smile. "I'm sorry to have worried you, Tousetsu. You're part of the reason I'm even sitting up right now. Thank you for everything."

"I require no thanks."

With her eyes cast downward, Tousetsu's expression was difficult to read, and Keigetsu bristled. *This would be so much easier if she fawned over me like the rest of the court ladies.*

"I did little but watch as you moaned in your sleep," her retainer went on.

"It's all right. Just that was more than enough."

"Yes. So it was."

Met with an unexpected response to what should have been a noble sentiment, Keigetsu's eyes went wide. "Huh?"

Her expression as inscrutable as ever, Tousetsu picked up the bowl and set it down on her tray. She slowly rose to her feet.

Thud!

Then, her next move was to slam her alleged mistress against the bed.

“Ow...!”

“Tell me,” she said in a growl deep enough to send a shiver down the spine. “Who are you?” She peered into Keigetsu’s face from spitting distance, a glint that could very well be described as murderous dancing in her black eyes.

“Wh-what are you talking about...? I’m Kou Reirin—eek!” Keigetsu attempted to answer her with a strained smile, only to have Tousetsu grab a fistful of her hair and ram her into the bed once more.

“Don’t you dare take the name of my Supreme One, you impostor!”

“Ow! Stop!” Keigetsu cried out, her protest bordering on a shriek.

“My beloved Maiden wouldn’t wail like an infant over losing a few hairs,” said Tousetsu as she glared down at her. “Even on her sickbed, she wouldn’t utter a phrase so vulgar as ‘damn it.’ She wouldn’t hurl insults at another Maiden. She wouldn’t disparage someone as a villainess and then turn around and accept her charity!”

“Hrk!” Keigetsu moaned in pain as the woman relentlessly jerked her around by the hair.

Being a distant relation of the Gen clan, Tousetsu drew a dagger from her breast with a practiced hand, then thrust the blade right before Keigetsu’s throat.

“I’ll ask one last time: Who is it that intrudes upon my Lady Reirin’s vessel?”

The animosity laid bare before her turned Keigetsu’s whole body cold. Noting that the chill of the blade against her neck had left the Maiden too paralyzed to speak, Tousetsu frowned and backed off ever so slightly.

“Allow me to change the question. You’re Shu Keigetsu, aren’t you?”

Though she phrased it as a question, in substance, it was a statement of fact.

“In hindsight, I’ve felt something off ever since the night of the Double Sevens Festival. Lady Reirin would never so gracelessly tumble over the balustrade.

Neither would she sleep the mornings away or cast those coquettish smiles His Highness's way."

"L-Let me go..."

"She is not one to let hints of crassness slip into her speech, to cry in front of others, or to balk at the thought of training. There is only one woman so vulgar, emotional, and lazy in all of the Maiden Court: Shu Keigetsu, the one who assaulted Lady Reirin on the night of the Double Sevens Festival and fainted at the same time she did! You switched your body with hers, didn't you?!"

"I said let go! Don't you care what happens to this vessel?!" Keigetsu shouted, a surge of vigor igniting her eyes. In the same moment, the flame of the nearest candle swelled and swooped toward Tousetsu's hand.



Tousetsu released her grip as she jerked out of its path, retreating a few steps into a defensive stance. “The mystic arts!”

“Got it in one.” The corners of Keigetsu’s mouth lifted into a smirk as she massaged her aching scalp.

Fire was the ultimate symbol of the Shu clan. She had all but confessed to her true identity with that stunt, but what mattered now was that she had a weapon to overpower her assailant.

“I can make fire do my bidding, and, if I amass enough qi, I can even steal another person’s form. Of course, it’s well within my power to inflict severe burns upon this body too. I’m the only one who can return Kou Reirin’s soul to its original vessel. Do you want your mistress’s body to be burnt to a crisp when she gets it back?”

It hadn’t slipped Keigetsu’s notice that for all Tousetsu’s malice, she hadn’t so much as nicked Reirin’s skin with her blade. Her loyalty to her mistress was absolute. Holding Kou Reirin’s body hostage was Keigetsu’s best shot at keeping her attacker at bay.

“Hah.”

Alas, Keigetsu had underestimated the viciousness of her opponent.

With a dark chuckle and not a moment’s hesitation, Tousetsu dashed over to a nearby water jug and emptied its contents onto Keigetsu. Such ruthlessness was a perfect reflection of her Gen heritage, the bloodline of water.

“Eeeep!”

“Water dampens fire. A flame so easily extinguished is nothing but a joke. Want to burn my mistress, do you? As if I’d give you the chance. All I have to do is keep on dousing you in water before you can ignite your flames.”

“Wha...”

Tousetsu once again grabbed the dumbstruck Keigetsu by the hair, forced her to her feet, and dragged her toward the door. “Stand. You’re taking us to the real Lady Reirin. Once the switch has been reversed, I’m going to pluck your eyes from their sockets.”

“U-unhand me! Let go already!”

Flailing wildly, Keigetsu managed to escape Tousetsu’s grip by falling on her backside.

“You can’t be serious. This body *just* left its would-be deathbed! Are you out to kill your mistress by drenching her when she’s already sick? Ugh, I feel awful. I think I might just die!”

So terrified she could barely breathe, Keigetsu racked her brains for everything they were worth. For all the unfathomable ferocity buried within her, Tousetsu’s loyalty was the real deal. Keigetsu’s only hope was to use that against her.

Yet Tousetsu only glanced back at her with a cold, doll-like expression. “Allow me to enlighten you.”

Just as she had begun to open the door, she closed it behind her once more. Her eyes narrowed as she looked down at where Keigetsu lay in a heap on the ground.

“Descendants of the Gen clan are taught the ins and outs of human anatomy from an early age,” she went on, bending down on one knee and slowly bringing her face to Keigetsu’s. “Which bones are easiest to break, and which are the slowest to heal. How to break them with the greatest chance of a clean recovery, and how to break them to maximize the amount of pain inflicted.”

Keigetsu shrank back, speechless.

“You have a point that drawn-out water torture would be bad for Lady Reirin’s health, to say nothing of how much time it would cost me. Perhaps I ought to start by breaking a few of your fingers. No matter—so long as everything is healed by the time Lady Reirin returns to her body, it’ll be like the injuries never even happened. Pain is but a memory. Your soul will be the one to bear all the burden.”

Tousetsu wasn’t bluffing. Her tone was completely matter-of-fact.

“You wouldn’t...”

“Or would I be better off letting bugs do the job? I could gather benign but

squalid insects in the bottom of an old well and dangle you down into its depths. I expect they'd crawl into your every orifice, but so long as I keep your eyes and ears shielded, it should be easy enough to pluck them out after the fact. Once your soul is gone, all I have to do is wash the body clean and return it to Lady Reirin. The whole process shouldn't take more than a few hours, so it's the method that would put the least amount of strain on her health."

The blood drained from Keigetsu's face as she imagined the horrifying spectacle. It would be enough to drive her over the edge.

"Eek!"

The look in Tousetsu's eyes said she meant business. Keigetsu had to think of something, *anything* that could break the woman's spirit and turn her attention elsewhere.

What her self-preservation instincts hit upon was Tousetsu's biggest soft spot.

"B-but what right do *you* have to do any of that?!"

"Excuse me?"

"It took you more than a week to see my true colors!" Keigetsu screamed, casting all caution to the wind. When Tousetsu swallowed hard, the Maiden pounced on the opening. "You put on airs of being Kou Reirin's most loyal retainer, but when it came down to it, you couldn't figure out who I really was! I even gave you the chance to see 'Shu Keigetsu'—the *real* Kou Reirin—yet you went so far as to give her poison on my orders! Am I wrong?!"

"Silence."

"Why, I'd be willing to bet you terrorized her just like this! *You* threatened and attacked the mistress who's supposed to mean more to you than anyone! That sure explains why you're going so overboard trying to shift the blame onto *me* now. Talk about pathetic!"

"*Silence!*" Tousetsu roared back, but Keigetsu didn't flinch.

Rather, she didn't have the luxury of faltering. If Keigetsu didn't do everything in her power to use her aggressor's weakness against her, her soul wouldn't be long for this world.

“In the end, you just don’t want to admit that you made a mistake, so you’re going after the root of your blunder to make yourself look better! That’s what happened when you berated ‘Shu Keigetsu’ in the dungeons, and it’s what’s happening now! It should be a court lady’s duty to rush to your poor mistress’s side, prostrate yourself before her, and apologize—not attack her enemies! Yet you’d put that aside to prioritize taking out your anger on me?!” Keigetsu spat.

“Ngh!” Tousetsu bit down on her lip, struck speechless at last. “This isn’t over...”

And with that, she spun on her heel and left the room behind.

“Huff...huff...”

Left alone, Keigetsu drew her soaking wet body in on itself as she cowered on the floor. She was still wheezing in fear.

It’s all over for me.

Tousetsu had run off to wherever the real Kou Reirin was—either the archery range or the storehouse, most likely. Keigetsu had screamed all those barbs out of a single-minded desire to escape the torture in store for her, but as soon as Tousetsu reunited with Kou Reirin and the full truth of the situation came to light, her impending doom was going to look even uglier.

Keigetsu had believed she could keep the situation under control so long as she kept Reirin’s body hostage, but only now did she understand how naive that had been.

If I’m in this much trouble with her court lady...just imagine what will happen when His Highness finds out.

A chill ran down her spine.

If she incurred the wrath of he who had inherited just as much of the Gen blood as Tousetsu—or even *more*—the man swathed in the dragon’s qi, Keigetsu was in for a world of hurt unlike anything she’d ever known. How on earth had she been so arrogant as to think that she could outmaneuver them? She wished she could smack her past self in the face, but it was too late for that.

Keigetsu sat in a heap on the floor, hugging herself with trembling arms.

“In the end...nothing ever changes.”

Self-deprecation spilled from her lips. She tried to lift the corners of her mouth into a smirk, but she couldn't manage it.

Even after trading bodies with the girl beloved by all, nothing had changed. Kou Reirin had managed to win over the court ladies in Shu Keigetsu's form, and despite getting her hands on Kou Reirin's body, it had taken a mere week for *her* to come under attack.

Keigetsu whined, the contempt she'd seen in Tousetsu's gaze reminding her of all the negative emotions she'd been exposed to in the past.

The disdain. The ridicule. The hatred. The neglect.

Her whole body felt sluggish. She gasped for breath as the sensation of the viscid darkness washed over her again.

No one will save me. No one will ever offer me a helping hand...or a smile.

“Lady Keigetsu...”

Keigetsu's eyes snapped open as she recalled a voice beautiful enough to dispel the darkness.

“I feel nothing but the utmost gratitude for you.”

It was a voice so gentle she couldn't believe it had come from her own mouth.

“If you've been struggling, I can help you resolve—”

It was the girl who had reached out a hand to her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Yes—*she* had thrown Keigetsu a lifeline countless times already.

“How...?” Her throat tightened. Hot tears pooled in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. “How do you always remain...so beautiful?”

Burying her face in her hands, Keigetsu wept. It was time to admit the truth: She didn't hate Kou Reirin. She admired her with enough overwhelming intensity to resent her.

Her beautiful face. Her slender limbs. Her melodious voice and gentle cadence. Her abundance of talent and strength. Though the Maiden looked

nothing but delicate at a glance, Keigetsu had learned from their switch that Kou Reirin disciplined herself and worked harder than she ever could have imagined.

Indeed—she was supple and gorgeous right down to her very soul. Despite the constant sickness that plagued her, she held her head high and fended it off with her well-honed soul and wits.

“...”

Abruptly, Keigetsu lifted her face.

Kou Reirin had always warded off illness with her inner strength and knowledge of herbs. As one who possessed neither her fortitude nor know-how, how had *Keigetsu* managed to survive her emergency?

It's because I drank the decoction Kou Reirin brewed for me. No, that's not it. Even before that...she drew the Bow of Warding for me.

If she had to guess, the encroaching darkness and those countless eyeballs had been a manifestation of the malady. The Bow of Warding's vibrations had driven it back. That was the entire reason she had been able to get out of bed.

Keigetsu sucked in a breath as she turned over the thoughts in her head.

It would make no sense for a “malady” to be cured by the sound of a bow. You couldn't call something like that an illness. That would be...

A curse.

She gulped instinctively at her own realization, then cast a silent glance around the room. The furniture was as rustic and inviting as one would expect from the Kou clan. Most of it was kept in tip-top condition and arranged so as to subtly complement the room. However, there was one piece of decor that stood apart from the rest.

It's this incense burner.

The censer so lavishly bedecked with delicate patterns of gold had been a get-well gift from the Kin clan. The incense smoke that wafted lazily from the latticework ought to have soothed her, but for some reason, the mere sight of it now made her heart thump in her chest.

“...”

Keigetsu slowly rose to her feet and approached the incense burner, the muscles of her face taut. By all appearances, it was a high-end item suited to the Kins and their penchant for glamour.

But there was something wrong about it.

When she focused her qi much the way she did to bolster her flames, she saw the censer's shadow take on an unusual shape. Listening closely, she heard something akin to the rustling of paper.

No way... Why is that coming from the Kin clan's present?

The moment she took another step toward the incense burner, her hands clutching at her racing heart, Keigetsu gave a start.

Shkkt!

“Eek!”

Out of nowhere, a small shadow popped out of the burner with a scuttling sound. An incorporeal, honest-to-goodness “shadow,” it slithered over the candle-lit wall until it had disappeared from the room altogether.

Keigetsu watched the entire scene play out in a cold sweat, her hands clamped over her mouth.

The shadow that just came out of the burner...

It had taken the shape of the spider. Her pulse quickened. She knew full well what a bug-shaped shadow signified.

Venomcraft.

And probably one that curses its target to die of sickness, at that.

The Daoist arts ranged from the academic to the absurd, including all sorts of forbidden spells to take lives or—conversely—to resurrect the dead. Among those, venomcraft was considered one of the most heinous taboos, seeing as it claimed the lives of numerous insects for the ultimate goal of killing a person.

Owing to a previous emperor's distaste for Daoist cultivators, their numbers had dwindled over the years and their arts had become harder to pass down, so

few possessed concrete knowledge of the forbidden spell. It took more than the well-known method of gathering up insects and forcing them to cannibalize each other to bring a venomcraft to completion; the spell wouldn't work without some knowledge of the Daoist arts and a recitation of the correct incantation.

Taking all that into account, Keigetsu knew of only one person who understood the workings of the forbidden spell and could chant the right words.

"How incredible! I had no idea the mystic arts were real."

It was the one who had once offered Keigetsu a kind smile and hung on to her every word.

"You can use it for something like that? Truly? Oh, no, I don't find it disturbing in the least. I'd love to hear more about it. How does the incantation go?"

It was the one who had praised her when no one else had spared her a second glance—who had made her feel on top of the world.

"My, you poor thing! What a shame for a girl with such a wonderful talent to have lost both parents at such a young age."

It was the one who was supposed to have appointed Keigetsu her successor out of compassion: Shu Gabi.

"No way..."

A droplet of water dripped from the ends of her sodden hair and trickled down her cheek.

Keigetsu stood rooted to the spot, stunned.

Chapter 2:

Reirin Forgives

“YOU ARE LADY REIRIN, aren’t you?!” came Tousetsu’s plea from where she knelt outside the storehouse.

For a while, Reirin did nothing but stare wordlessly back at her. Technically, she *did* move her mouth, but no words that could describe the swap would leave her lips.

Where would I even begin, anyway?

So much had happened since she first switched bodies. It felt like it had been ages since Keigetsu had pushed her from the pagoda on the night of the Double Sevens Festival.

After surviving the Lion’s Judgment, she had been exiled to a storehouse. She had soon befriended a lovely court lady and attended a banquet to unmask the Kin retainer who had victimized her, only to discover that said woman had never existed. As if all that weren’t enough, her body had then fallen ill with Keigetsu still inside it, and, in an attempt to exorcise the malady, she had drawn a bow until she passed out.

At the start of the switch, Reirin had done what she could to make her plight known, but she had let those efforts fall to the wayside in all the ensuing chaos.

Here Tousetsu finally figured out the truth, but I don’t feel the least bit relieved... Instead, I’m fretting over how to explain myself.

As it hit her that she had grown even more accustomed to her new life than she thought, a rueful smile rose to Reirin’s face. She slowly stood from her bed of grass and strode over to where her court lady had pressed her forehead to the ground. Her weary body felt heavy as lead and her sense of balance was precarious, but for better or worse, Reirin was used to walking around in such a miserable condition.

“Tousetsu.” The woman gave a jolt at the mere mention of her name. In soft

tones, Reirin went on, “For a start, I bid you rise. Let’s talk this out calmly.”

“I can’t! Nevermore do I deserve to stand at the same height as you!”
Tousetsu dug in her heels, an air of desperation about her. She was already fully convinced that the person standing before her was Reirin, it seemed.

Left with no other choice, the Maiden steadied herself against the door frame and then lowered herself into a crouch. “Very well. Then I shall come down to you.”

“Oh...”

When Reirin offered her a serene smile, Tousetsu shook her head as though overcome, her eyes swimming with tears once more. “*This* is the Lady Reirin I know... How could I have spent an entire week believing that Shu Keigetsu was you?!”

“When and how did you figure out the truth?”

“As much as it shames me to admit, I didn’t realize it until right before I came here. I grew suspicious when she muttered vulgarities in the delirium of her fever; at that point, all the little inconsistencies I’d noticed had begun to add up, so I asked her for an explanation as soon as she was awake.”

“My. She confessed everything of her own accord?” Reirin asked, surprised.

After a beat, Tousetsu nodded back impassively. “Yes. We had ourselves a civil chat.”

Ah. So Tousetsu threatened her.

Reirin broke out into a cold sweat. As unflappable as Tousetsu appeared, she had learned firsthand that her retainer was more volatile than she let on.

“All the same, I would like to hear your own account of what happened, Lady Reirin. What on earth did she do to you? Why did you allow yourself to stay trapped in that witch’s body for a whole week, forced to endure such wretched circumstances?!”

“Erm...”

Reirin opened and closed her mouth, then pressed a hand to her cheek in dismay. Perhaps the time had come to break out the butt charades.

Considering what a shock it would give Leelee, perhaps I ought to think up a more appropriate way to communicate the truth.

She cast a glance Leelee's way, wondering how the bystander dragged into their conversation was taking the sudden news. Her eyes widened in surprise at what she found. Though Leelee was listening intently to what Reirin had to say, she didn't look the least bit shocked to hear any of it.

"You're not surprised, Leelee?" the Maiden asked her.

"What? That you're not Shu Keigetsu?" Picking up the candlestick that sat on the ground, Leelee gave a shrug of her shoulders. "How should I put this...? I've had a feeling about that part of it for a while now. There were even a handful of times I wondered if perhaps my mistress had switched places with Lady Kou Reirin. Of course, I never dreamed that His Highness's most esteemed 'butterfly' would turn out to be such a character, so I can't claim that point *doesn't* strike me as a surprise."

"A *character*?" Reirin parroted back the somewhat unflattering descriptor with an emotion that defied words. "I'm so sorry... All this time you've suspected me of being a charlatan, yet still you were gracious enough to leave me be," she said, crestfallen.

"That's not what I meant!" Leelee insisted, looking back at her mistress in a fluster. "I've never thought you were anyone suspicious! I mean, I *did* think you were a nutcase...but I wanted you to stay the person you were. I got the feeling that if I said anything, the twist of fate that brought us together would go up in smoke, taking your whole existence with it... So I could never bring myself to ask you about it," she mumbled, so frantic to make excuses that she didn't even think to choose her words.

"Goodness!" said Reirin, her eyes lighting up as she looked back at her attendant. "I'm so glad to hear it. It sounds like you've taken even more of a liking to me than I thought!"

"Wha...! C'mon, I'm your court lady! Whether or not I like you has nothing to do with—"

"Correct." Tousetsu coolly interrupted the blushing Leelee from her place on the ground. "It would be beyond presumptuous of a mere retainer to 'take a

liking' to Lady Reirin. On that note, where do you get off speaking to her like an equal? Have some shame."

"Er... Now, now! If I recall, didn't *you* take a rather brash tone with me down in the dungeons?" Reirin said, rushing to the defense of her startled attendant.

Now it was Tousetsu's turn to gasp, upon which she drew a dagger from her robe in one swift motion. "Your anger is perfectly justified, milady. Not only did I fail to notice your predicament, but I went so far as to insult you and give you poison! Such a grave offense ought to be punished with death. Now that it's come to this, allow me to apologize by gouging out these knotholes I call eyes —!"

"Stop!"

"And where did you learn to draw a dagger from your breast like that?!" Leelee boggled, alarmed by the lightning speed with which Tousetsu had produced her blade.

I can't believe how impulsive Tousetsu can be...

Reirin was taken aback once more. She thought she'd learned the depths of Tousetsu's loyalty and fervor during their dungeon encounter, but here she was getting the same lesson all over again.

If it weren't for everything that happened, I might have gone my whole life without ever knowing the real her.

After all, having pegged Tousetsu for the aloof sort, Reirin had always taken special care to keep what her retainer might consider a comfortable distance. It was amazing to think about all the things she had learned from the switch.

As she reflected on the experience, Reirin gently reached out for Tousetsu's dagger hand and forced her to set the blade on the ground.

"Please calm down. I need you to keep a cool head. If you don't take the lead in this conversation, I'm afraid I can't explain much of anything."

"What do you mean?" Tousetsu asked, her brow crinkling into a skeptical frown, but it didn't take long for her sharp wit to kick in. "Did Shu Keigetsu do something to keep you from talking?"

The way Reirin opened and closed her mouth seemed to lead her to an epiphany.

“So it was that magic of hers... I take it she’s sealed your voice from saying anything inconvenient for her—anything that could explain the truth of the situation? Perhaps you could try writing it all down...or has she prevented that too? In that case, what if you nodded yes or no to the questions I ask?”

The attentive head court lady accounted for every imaginable scenario before Reirin even had the chance to answer her. Next, she fired off a handful of test questions, and as soon as she deduced that her mistress could answer anything that didn’t directly relate to the body swap, she changed her approach.

“In short, Shu Keigetsu used the mystic arts to switch bodies with you on the night of the Double Sevens Festival. Does anything I just said strike you as odd?”

“No.”

Tousetsu had Reirin respond to inquiries about *her* in the negative or affirmative rather than confirm anything about the situation itself.

After a mere handful of questions, Tousetsu had uncovered the full truth in almost no time at all: Shu Keigetsu had switched their bodies with the mystic arts, she had done it to take Reirin’s place and win Gyoumei’s favor, “Shu Keigetsu” stealing her diary was a lie she had invented to keep the truth from getting out, and Reirin and Keigetsu had been in contact with one another.

“As far as I can tell, she hasn’t shown a single sign of guilt since assuming leadership of the Kou Palace in your name. Curse you, Shu Keigetsu! Torture at the hands of the Eagle Eyes would be too light a punishment for her crimes. I won’t rest until I’ve used every Gen trick in the book to bring her the most painful torment imaginable!” the head court lady grumbled forebodingly, gnashing her teeth.

Reirin scrambled to talk her down. “Hold on a second! The truth is, I’m very grateful for the circumstances.”

“Excuse me?”

“What?” Even Leelee was shocked enough to speak.

Reirin did her best to put her feelings into words, taking care to avoid any terms like “the switch” or “Keigetsu.”

“I’ve spent the past seven days in such great health. I’ve had the chance to indulge in my hobbies to my heart’s content, free of anyone’s scrutiny. I met a court lady whom I can be myself around. I’ve been able to feast on all my favorite foods, laugh, and get angry. I’ve tried my hand at so many things I could never do before and learned of so many things I never knew.”

“...”

“Of course, I can’t leave you-know-who to languish in infirmity, and we both have our own responsibilities as Maidens, so I know we have to put things right again. But to me, these past seven days have been...a treasure. If at all possible, I want to return her body to her without any fuss, cherishing the memories we made along the way,” she murmured, lowering her gaze and smiling at the very end of her speech.

Tousetsu fell silent for some time, until at last she said, “Understood.”

“I’m glad—”

“If my dearest and most benevolent celestial maiden cannot bear to raise a hand against her foe, then that is all the more reason I must take the judgment into my own hands.” Tousetsu clenched her fists with a face as devoid of emotion as ever.

“What? *That’s* your takeaway?!” Reirin couldn’t stop herself from shouting back.

“Of course. I’m going to kill her, no matter what it takes.”

Seeing her court lady’s utter unwillingness to back down struck Reirin with the tiniest urge to tease her.

““Sewer rat.””

“Pardon?”

“That’s what you called me. And with such a scary look on your face too... Oh, what a harrowing experience that was!”

When her mistress made a show of putting a hand to her cheek, it was almost

comical how fast Tousetsu blanched.

“I...I cannot apologize enough...”

Reirin carried on, having a little fun in spite of herself. “I was so relieved to see a familiar face in those pitch-dark dungeons... Imagine my surprise when I was told off for the mere act of calling your name! I was simply devastated.”

“I’m so sorry! Please forgive me!”

“Shall I refer to you as Lady Kou Tousetsu from now on?”

“No! You should refer to me as ‘scum’!”

By this point, Tousetsu was grinding her forehead into the ground with the force of her groveling.

“I was right! My only recourse is to take my own—”

Her eyes glistening with tears, she made another grab for her dagger, but Reirin put a swift stop to whatever she was planning.

“No, Tousetsu,” she scolded her retainer with a sweet smile. “I believe it to be a dozen times more difficult to lead a healthy life than to die.”

Tousetsu sucked in a breath, aware of the weight the words held coming from a girl who had braved countless brushes with death.

“If you truly wish for forgiveness—or rather, if you truly wish to make amends—you mustn’t take the easy way out.”

Her mistress’s steady gaze cowed Tousetsu into silence.

“Yes,” she finally conceded after a long pause, “you’re right.”

Reirin breathed a sigh of relief. For the time being, at least, it seemed she had dissuaded her retainer from acting against Shu Keigetsu.

Or so she thought.

“As much as it pains me, I will neither harm that sewer rat nor take my own life.”

“Oh, Tousetsu? The way you phrased that makes it sound like you have another idea in mind.”

The silent pressure behind Reirin's smile intensified. After she prompted Tousetsu one more time, the woman known as "the glacial court lady" averted her gaze.

"I refuse to look after her henceforth. If at all possible, I will request a transfer to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion so I can continue to serve you. There's a chance she may starve to death if the rest of the court ladies forsake her in light of my departure, but I wouldn't be doing anything to her."

"Tousetsu."

"In my distress, I may let slip to Her Majesty or His Highness that the Maiden of the Kou Palace is behaving strangely, but that shouldn't count as a direct violation of your orders."

"..."

Reirin put a hand to her cheek and heaved a deep sigh. A part of her was fed up with her retainer's obstinance, but one look at Tousetsu's face turned her frustration into a helpless smile.

Her features screwed into a frown, the head court lady's eyes were wet with tears, and her nose flushed red.

She looks like a pouting child.

She must have been scared. Not only had she failed to notice that the subject of her undying loyalty had been replaced, but she had even given her poison. All the actions she had taken to protect her beloved mistress had instead driven her further into a corner. Yet forbidden from punishing the culprit or demonstrating her remorse, she was left with nowhere to direct her emotions.

"I'm sorry to have worried you, but I promise that I've been doing just fine. Don't worry—your loyalty has reached me loud and clear."

"..."

When Reirin reached out to brush a hand over her cheek, Tousetsu's eyes shook with emotion.

"Look at how badly you're hurt," the woman said, pursing her lips. As she blinked away her tears, she took Reirin's cloth-swaddled hands in her own

trembling ones. “What are these shabby excuses for bandages? The blood has soaked them bright red. Even your clothes have been reduced to a tattered, sleeveless mess. Here you are in such wretched condition...and yet you’re lying atop a bed of grass, not a furnishing or lantern in sight. This is...too much...”

“Tousetsu. It’s all right. I’ve been happy and healthy here. I mean it.”

“I’m...so sorry...” The tears Tousetsu had been fighting so hard to hold back ended up spilling forth with her apology. “I am truly sorry...that you’ve been suffering all this time, and still I remained ignorant to your plight...”

“That’s not true at all.”

Reirin cradled the head of the court lady several years her elder in a gentle embrace. She knew that when the prideful woman came to her senses later, she would be ashamed to have let anyone else see her tears.

It wasn’t long before Tousetsu’s muffled sobs died down and her shoulders stopped shaking. When Reirin was sure that she had gotten everything out of her system, she cupped her retainer’s cheeks in her hands and forced her to lift her gaze.

“Very well, Tousetsu. I have a proposal.”

“What...?”

“I forbid you from hurting either you-know-who *or* yourself. You are not to resign from the Palace of the Golden Qilin, nor may you tell Her Majesty or His Highness the truth. Following these simple rules is all you have to do to make amends,” said Reirin, smiling as she stroked the woman’s thoroughly disheveled hair. “All this time, I’ve been incapable of telling anyone the truth. Now it’s your turn to suffer the same fate. Consider this your punishment—it’ll feel easier to accept that way, won’t it?”

“But that’s...far too merciful!” said Tousetsu, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You’ll be enduring the same hardship as your mistress. What’s merciful about that?” countered Reirin, impishly wagging her finger. “Now then! It’s time you returned to the Palace of the Golden Qilin. The Kous’ head court lady shouldn’t be dawdling in another clan’s palace. I understand why you’re angry at a certain someone, but you have to conduct yourself in a manner befitting

your position.”

Tousetsu thrust herself forward with a frown. “But—”

“Tousetsu,” Reirin interrupted her. “She may have made it through the night alive, but the Maiden Court isn’t so kind as to display unmitigated sympathy for a Maiden who does nothing but lie in bed. I’m sure the four consorts and their fledglings will take this chance to shake the Palace of the Golden Qilin to its core. It’s because I trust you that I’m asking you to stay at the Kou Palace and protect our people.”

It was hard for Tousetsu to argue with that.

“Very well, milady.” All her avenues of escape cut off and a sense of responsibility instilled in their place, Tousetsu narrowed her eyes with the intensity of someone staring into a blinding light but ultimately gave a firm nod of her head. “I understand. If that is what you command of me, then I shall do my best.”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

Now that she had her court lady seeing things her way, Reirin finally relaxed.

Tousetsu kowtowed one last time before she reluctantly rose to her feet. But when she caught sight of Leelee standing by Reirin’s side, her eyes flashed in warning. “I was *not* crying, so take care not to go around running your mouth.”

“Yeah, sure. Not like I could see much of anything by the light of a single candle.”

“Good attitude. But that’s ‘yes, ma’am’ to you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After stopping to threaten the younger court lady, she at last left the storehouse behind. Against all expectations, Leelee didn’t look the least bit intimidated, instead watching her go with a look of exasperation.

“Man, she’s *a lot* in a whole bunch of ways.”

“I’m sorry for all the trouble...”

“Don’t be. I’m impressed you could get that raging beast to back down

without a fight. She really came in swinging,” Leelee said, turning around with a swaggering shrug.

For a while, the pair stared at one another in silence.

“ ... ”

A summer insect chirped its song somewhere in the garden.

Leelee was the first to say something. “So...you really *were* Lady Kou Reirin,” she murmured, looking her mistress up and down.

Even exhausted, the Maiden boasted a lithe and graceful posture. A tranquil expression sat upon her face. The voice with which she’d admonished her court lady had been tender, and the way she worried over the affairs of the Palace of the Golden Qilin as its Maiden spoke not only to her kindness but to her gravitas and smarts.

She may have shared a face with Shu Keigetsu, but she was an entirely different person. Now that Leelee knew the truth, it was hard not to see all the hints that had been there from the very beginning.

I’ve been pretending not to notice.

In all likelihood, that had been the case ever since she started referring to the girl before her exclusively as “milady.” Although she’d made up her mind that the Maiden was her precious mistress—no, *because* of that—she had averted her eyes from the truth, sensing that it would spell the end of their time together.

“I’m sorry for deceiving you for so long,” came Reirin’s forlorn apology.

Leelee gave an immediate shake of her head. “Don’t be! It’d be crazy—I mean, there is no reason for *you* to apologize,” she said, adopting a more formal tone as she went down on her knees. “The blame lies squarely with that despicable Shu Keigetsu. Please accept my humble apologies on behalf of the entire Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.”

“Stop that, Leelee!” Reirin helped her attendant back to her feet, a look of distress on her features. “Please treat me the same way you always have. I wouldn’t have enjoyed my time here nearly as much if not for your candor.”

“But...”

“The truth is out to both you and Tousetsu. I may have sworn her to secrecy, but it’s only a matter of time before the situation becomes untenable. Sooner or later, our life here will come to an end. Do me a favor and indulge me until then.”

Both her voice and her expression were thick with regret. The same went for Leelee as she stared back at her. The redhead’s large, catlike eyes were swimming with sorrow.

Their shared life in the storehouse had been like a dream come true. Though both of them wished those days could last forever, one of them happened to be the flower of the court—the sovereign Maiden extolled as the prince’s butterfly.

What’s more, though the true identity of that court lady remained a mystery, it was a fact that Reirin had been a target of the Kin clan’s schemes. There wasn’t a single reason for her to stick around in the body of a girl who had amassed so many enemies.

The time to say goodbye was close at hand.

Leelee chewed on her lip, but in an attempt to pull herself from her reverie, she eventually forced her lips into a smirk. “Fair enough. I have to admit, it’s hard to pay the proper respect to the prince’s butterfly knowing that she’s such a reckless, potato-loving, training-obsessed weirdo.”

“That’s harsh, Leelee!” Reirin giggled, cottoning on to her attendant’s attempt to lift the mood. Leelee didn’t fail to catch the slight sway of her body as she brought a hand to her lips.

“Hold it. Is it just me, or are you wobbling a little?”

“Hm? No, not at all.”

Reirin wasted no time correcting her posture and smiling as though nothing had happened. Not to be fooled, Leelee held up the candle Tousetsu had left behind and brought it to her mistress’s face.

“Wha... You’ve got to be kidding me! You’re pale as a ghost!”

“It’s a trick of the light.”

“How is it even possible to look that pallid in the glow of a flame?!”

Leelee discarded the candlestick in a hurry and put a steadying hand on her mistress’s shoulder. She nearly broke down crying when she saw how much Reirin teetered on her feet throughout the short walk back to the storehouse.

“I shouldn’t be surprised... You stayed up all night, took someone to task, danced, brewed herbs, drew a giant bow, and tore yourself up in the process... There’s no way someone who blacked out could get back up so soon without feeling the consequences.”

“Please, you’re overreacting! This is no big deal. Why, I’m feeling positively cozy. It’s like the stars of the night sky are twinkling before my very eyes!”

“That’s called seeing spots!”

“And my body is swaying back and forth in time with the beating of my heart.”

“*That’s* called vertigo!” Leelee yelled back, laying her mistress down upon her bed of grass.

“Oh... I have to wash the rice in time for tomorrow’s breakfast...”

“Go the hell to sleep!”

Never one to learn her lesson, Reirin attempted to wriggle her way out of bed, but Leelee shoved her back down.

“Listen here! If you try washing the rice with those blood-caked hands of yours, *I’m* going to unleash divine retribution before the god of agriculture gets a chance! You’re not allowed to take a single step from this bed for the entire day tomorrow!”

“Then at least let me embroider—”

“No sewing! No knitting! No weaving, no chopping, and no brewing! No nothing! *Sleep*, you dumbass work addict!” the redhead screamed, jabbing a finger at her Maiden.

Reirin’s face fell. “You’re not mincing words with your mistress, Leelee...”

“That’s what you asked me to do!” she howled back in a fit of desperation.

“Oh,” said the Maiden, her long eyelashes fluttering as she blinked. “That’s right.”

Finding something amusing about the whole exchange, she burst into another fit of giggles where she lay in bed.

“Hee hee... I did, didn’t I? I appreciate it.”

For all her protests, she must have been feeling drowsy; a smile lingering upon her lips, her eyes gradually drifted shut.

“Thanks, Leelee...”

With that one last murmur, Reirin fell back asleep.

Leelee gazed silently upon her slumbering mistress for some time.

“You sure know how to make trouble.”

Her mind traveled to the Tousetsu-led Golden Qilin court ladies, who were so overprotective that word of their fussing had reached the other clans. Likewise, she thought of the empress who treated Reirin like the apple of her eye and the crown prince who so loved to dote upon her. Before Leelee had gotten to know the Maiden, she’d been appalled at the degree to which they had all fawned over a single girl, but she understood how they felt now. It wasn’t *fawning*, really—they simply couldn’t leave her to her own devices. For how sweet and innocent she was, she was equal parts reckless and stubborn.

“Here’s hoping she gets at least one full day of rest...”

The swap was done for.

Under normal circumstances, this would be the time to denounce Shu Keigetsu. Leelee needed to get into contact with her, back her into a corner, and put a stop to her no-good, body-snatching scheme at once.

But still...

That blasted woman only just made it back from the brink of death. One can hope that she’ll keep her head down while she recuperates.

She’d give it one more day. No, maybe even two or three.

Leelee could only hope that her strangely fulfilling life in the run-down storehouse would carry on for at least that long.

Chapter 3:

Interlude

AND THEN CAME THE NEXT DAY—the morning after the Ghost Festival. In striking contrast to the despair wrought by news of Kou Reirin’s close call a mere day ago, the Maiden Court was bathed in brilliant rays of sunlight, the refreshing breeze of a summer morning blowing across the grounds. It was a perfect reflection of the festive mood that had swept the Palace of the Golden Qilin in honor of its Maiden’s recovery. The palace southwest of the court had been inundated with get-well gifts from the crown prince, which the gamboge golds paraded around with pride, the cheerful looks on their faces a complete one-eighty from the previous night.

“Good heavens. You’d think we were celebrating the birth of a new prince,” said Kin Reiga, her face creasing into a disgruntled frown as she strode down the cloister that connected the Palace of the Metallic Shade to the Maiden Court.

The Pure Consort—who boasted the same brand of resplendent beauty as Seika—didn’t look pleased to see that the Maiden of the Kou Palace was once again the center of the court’s attention.

“Surely you jest, Aunt Reiga. If Lady Reirin were ever to give His Highness a son, I assure you the commotion would be enough to put this to shame,” Seika pointed out from where she trailed along behind the consort, a hint of boredom in her tone. “Oh, but despite the fair share of gifts you’ve gotten for warming His Majesty’s bed, I suppose you never *have* been congratulated on bearing him a child. It’s no wonder you wouldn’t know what to expect.”

The smile she made behind her fan was filled with such scathing venom, it was hard to believe it was directed at her own aunt.

“*Excuse* me? Is that any way to speak to the Pure Consort, Seika?”

“Not to worry—I’ll be the Noble Consort in due time.”

The pair traded smiles, but the chill that ran between them was almost

enough to dispel the summer heat.

Despite the timorous glances exchanged by the ivory silks attending the consort and her fledgling respectively, this was a familiar sight around the Palace of the Metallic Shade. Be they an aunt and her niece or a Maiden and her guardian, the two were on abysmal terms with one another.

The reason lay in their background. Although Seika's mother—a woman named Seishuu—was Reiga's half sister, she was the daughter of their shared father's legal wife, while Reiga had been born the child of his mistress. Furthermore, despite her status as an illegitimate daughter of the Kins, Reiga and her mother had made use of their good looks to assume control of the clan and bully the rightful heiress into submission. Reiga had left Seishuu out in the cold as she indulged herself in every luxury imaginable, ultimately claiming the seat of the Pure Consort while her older sister was married off to a man of low status. Seika couldn't stand her aunt's shamelessness and greed.

People of the Kin clan could be divided into two types: idealistic artists and materialistic merchants. That two such conflicting temperaments had manifested within a single clan was owed to the crossing of two different bloodlines.

Long ago, the patriarch of the western lands—the one responsible for managing the gold offered up to the gods—had called his line of descendants the "Haku" clan. Written with the character for "white," its people were named for their unblemished souls and untarnished pride. Nevertheless, while their high regard for integrity and aesthetic was a good trait to have as ritual-performing priests, around the time that gold became a more established form of currency, the masses came to shun the ruling clan. From the people's point of view, the Hakus were too high-minded—or too hung up on impractical ideals, perhaps.

For example, one generation's Haku patriarch had come up with the idea to grow white flowers along a western strip of their land, believing it would make for a spectacular sight in the autumn months and double as a commemorative service to the ancestors, and had ordered a cutback on agricultural production to that end. The farmers deprived of their fields hadn't been altogether too pleased with the decision.

Discontent simmered among the subjects who desired immediate sustenance over pretty scenery to last the next decade, and the ones to step forward at the call had been the branch family of the Kin clan. Craftily playing on the people's frustrations, the clan slowly but surely strengthened their influence until at last the house of the western ruler was renamed to the "Kin" clan.

However, so much of their reign was preoccupied with wealth and the pursuit of immediate material gain that the gap between the rich and the poor grew and grew as time went on. The final straw came when an epidemic ravaged the western lands. The dignitaries of the Kin clan hogged all the medicine for themselves, sparking another explosion of discontent and plunging the territory into a state of civil war. As fate would have it, what ended up delivering the have-nots from the plague was the white flower the Haku leader had planted several decades earlier. The medicinal properties of its roots were found to work wonders against the disease.

Over time, it became common knowledge throughout the west: The Kin clan knew how to make a profit, but the Haku clan kept an eye to the future. So it was that the current incarnation of the Kin clan was established, with the descendants of the Haku clan considered the direct line and the branch family meant to serve as their vassals. The mainline patriarch would make his decisions based on long-term considerations and his sense of aesthetics, unfettered by worldly concerns, while the vassal family would implement a series of more practical measures. The two factions would support one another to help build the clan to prosperity.

Each side acknowledged the other's abilities, but whether the two of them got along was a different question altogether—to which the answer was a resounding no.

The mainline descendants scorned the branch family as uncultured swine, and the vassals ridiculed *them* as naive fools in turn. Seika and Reiga's mutual hatred proved they were no exception to this rule. The reason that Reiga had chosen Seika to be her Maiden in spite of this was simple: There was none more beautiful or skilled than her among the current generation of Kin daughters. It seemed Reiga had enough "Kin" blood in her that she was willing to take someone she hated under her wing if it meant a boost to her own reputation.

“Hah! The *Noble* Consort? How obliging of you to set your sights below the throne. You’ve never even entertained the idea of becoming the Maiden Court’s new mistress, have you?” said the consort. It was an obvious attempt to get a rise out of her niece.

Seika flicked her gaze toward the courtyard with a sigh. The gardens surrounding the cloister that led to the Maiden Court were nothing less than magnificent. The Kin Palace had spared no expense to paint their grounds with all manner of exotic rocks and seasonal flowers. It was a lot more pleasing to the senses than a middle-aged woman who reeked of rouge and powder, that was for certain.

“I see a certain sort of dancer every now and then, Aunt Reiga—one who overestimates her talent and embarrasses herself in her attempts to upstage the main act. The last thing I’d want is to end up such a third-rate performer.”

“...”

“Third-rate” was Reiga’s least favorite word. It was a sign of how self-conscious she was that the Pure Consort was third in line after the empress and Noble Consort.

Though Reiga’s eyes flashed with anger, a consort who had survived life in the inner court wasn’t so easily baited. It didn’t take long for her to put a lid on her rage and school her voice into its usual ladylike tones. Granted, part of that could be chalked up to the fact that the two of them were closing in fast on the Maiden Court.

“You’re so modest, Seika. But it takes more than a little humility to make it in the inner court. Don’t forget that the fate of the Kin court ladies—no, the Kin clan as a whole—is resting on your shoulders.” Reiga slowed her pace until she was walking side by side with her niece and then whispered into her ear, “The reason a girl as sickly as Lady Reirin has held on to her spot at the top lies in His Highness’s affections for her. But during yesterday’s ceremony, he showed a clear interest in Shu Keigetsu. Of course, I highly doubt a sewer rat like her will manage to capitalize on the chance to win his favor—but if you’re hoping to dethrone Lady Reirin, now is the time to strike.”

“...”

Seika's gorgeous features scrunched into a frown.

No sooner had the pair passed through the gates of the Maiden Court than Reiga plastered a lovely smile on her face and handed the gamboge golds another present to add to their pile, saying, "Here, a small token for Lady Reirin." Seika watched with repugnance.



Reiga's choice of gifts always evoked her obsession with money. She gave out whatever high-end items she could get her hands on, paying no consideration to the context or the recipient's personal tastes. It was the definition of uncouth, not a shred of aesthetic to be found in the gesture. With the way she did things, the recipient would have no way of knowing who the present had even come from. Gifts were recorded in the catalog with no more detail than "incense burner" or "comb," after all.

When Seika averted her gaze in disgust, she saw the rest of the consorts make their demure entrance from the other cloisters. Virtuous Consort Ran and Worthy Consort Gen each had their Maidens in tow, while Noble Consort Shu had shown up unaccompanied.

Today's tea party was meant to be an occasion for the four consorts and their Maidens to ask after Kou Reirin, who had just recovered from her illness. Seeing as it was forbidden to enter another clan's palace in the absence of a very compelling reason, the gathering was being held at the Maiden Court instead of the Palace of the Golden Qilin. By the same token, the one to receive their get-well gifts would not be the bedridden girl herself but her guardian, Empress Kenshoo.

A catalog of "get-well gifts" and a "check-in" complete with seating arrangements? How ridiculous.

Seika watched with indifference as the women clad in their respective clans' colors took their seats according to their rank. How many of them were genuinely there to congratulate Kou Reirin on her recovery? The true purpose of this so-called "check-in" was to criticize her for her sickly constitution and spread the word that she was unfit to serve as a Maiden.

Lady Reirin is beautiful. She has an abundance of talent and is a girl beloved and acclaimed by all. Yet even she isn't safe from this treachery.

It nauseated Seika how eager the women were to destroy a rival at the slightest sign of weakness.

No, the other Maidens she could forgive. Gen Kasui kept stealing anxious glances in the direction of the Kou Palace, and Ran Houshun had hunched in on herself to dodge the sparks flying between the consorts. It was proof that the

darkness of the inner court had yet to corrupt them. Both Kasui and Houshun looked demoralized by the bloodthirsty nature of the gathering, and when Seika glanced in their direction, it was immediately returned with a passing look of commiseration.

That said, neither did they bother to admonish their guardians. The Maidens were the flowers of the eponymous court—but in the end, a fledgling was only a fledgling, and it was the consorts who ran the show. As those under their tutelage, the Maidens couldn't afford to speak out against them.

“But, Consort Shu... My term of suspension is over, and I’m not trying to start a fight. I only want to have a discussion.”

It was then that the voice of a certain girl played back in Seika's mind.

“Then so long as I don’t interrupt the proceedings and don’t embarrass you further, I’m free to continue my discussion with Lady Seika?”

She boasted a dignified gaze and possessed all the pleasantness of a summer sky. Her head held high, she had shown surprising strength of will—no matter that she had once been known for keeping her shoulders hunched and her gaze on the floor.

Shu Keigetsu...

Her dance had been beautiful. No doubt many in the crowd had been moved by her offer to nurse Kou Reirin back to health and her uncowed persistence in the face of the crown prince and the empress's refusal. Admittedly, Seika had written her off as a hypocrite when she first brewed her herbs and began to draw her bow, but when she heard the echoes of her bowstring continue into the night, she had been forced to take her hat off to the girl's willpower.

In addition to the gamboge golds, the Ran and Gen clans had likely sent spies of their own to the archery range. Seika didn't doubt that Kasui and Houshun were feeling the same guilt she was.

Between the four of them, Shu Keigetsu alone had shown the courage to defy the Noble Consort and the diligence to exorcise what ailed Kou Reirin.

Shu Keigetsu was nowhere to be seen among the gathered faces. Rumor had it that she had collapsed from exhaustion on the training grounds around the

same time Kou Reirin had stirred awake. Her bad habit of skipping official functions had always been frowned upon, but in this particular instance, it made the completely opposite impression.

She was the only one who had offered Kou Reirin a helping hand—and she was the only one absent from an occasion designed to drag the girl through the mud.

“My, take a look at that! The late-blooming buttercups in that vase are simply gorgeous. But doesn’t it look like they’ve started to droop?”

“You’re right. For all their beauty, the yellow blossoms are delicate enough to wilt from the moment they’re picked. If sticking them in a luxurious jade vase is all it takes to kill them, why, I almost have to pity the poor flowers.”

From their neighboring seats raised a step above the Maidens, Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran made small talk loaded with double meanings, covering their mouths with their fans. Needless to say, their remarks were meant to be a sly dig at the frail Maiden of the Kou clan. Worthy Consort Gen—the lowest-ranked of the quartet—declined to insert herself into the discussion, instead staring vacantly off into the gardens. The highest-ranked Noble Consort Shu likewise did nothing but hang her head in silence.

Say, Shu Keigetsu... I’ve remembered the one good thing about having a sewer rat like you around. Seika spoke to the girl in her mind, dropping her gaze in melancholy. *Your own filth makes it harder to notice the stench of these rotten women.*

Before long, the gamboge gold court ladies fell to their knees, heralding the entrance of Empress Kenshuu herself.

“Greetings, ladies. I’d like to thank you all for coming here on behalf of my dear Maiden. It’s appreciated,” she announced with an air of dignity.

The moment she took her seat at the table marked the start of the “check-in.”

Seika huffed a soft sigh as she was served a cup of the premium chrysanthemum tea said to have been brewed with the morning dew.

Don't they have anything better to do?

Kenshuu sighed inwardly as she gulped down a cup of the fancy tea set aside for entertaining guests.

The empress didn't care for tea or sweets—but if nothing else, this particular brand of tea was redeemed by its similar taste to chrysanthemum wine. She was willing to bet that it could have been quite tasty if she'd brewed a stronger pot and had it with a dash of liquor. Though it was still early in the day, she wasn't sure how she was going to make it through this tedious tea party without a stiff drink. Kenshuu had never been a fan of formal functions like tea ceremonies and poetry gatherings. It would have been a hundred times more fun to do practice swings with the convalescent Reirin than to engage in mind games from across a table.

"I must say, while I'm glad she's feeling better now, it's such a shame that Lady Reirin missed out on the Ghost Festival ceremony. I'd been telling the girls of the Ran Palace to watch and learn from her dance for so long! It's almost like watching a butterfly flit across the stage."

"I concur, Consort Ran! A ceremony without Lady Reirin feels as empty as a garden without flowers. My Seika still has so much to learn. I can only hope she managed to make up for the loss."

"How modest, Consort Kin! Lady Seika's dance was no less bewitching to behold than the foliage of the autumn trees. My little Houshun, meanwhile, is far too reserved in everything she does."

"Don't be silly! Lady Houshun was as lovely as a spring blossom. No matter how small it is, a flower is still a flower. Perhaps it's hard to measure up to a gorgeous peony like Lady Reirin, but be it Seika or Lady Houshun, either can provide a feast for the eyes so long as she blossoms healthy and strong."

For a while now, the two adjacent consorts had been smiling and obliquely insulting Reirin for her poor health. Though they buried their point under compliments and self-effacement, what they were ultimately getting at was this: "Compared to the chronically ill Kou Reirin, Kin Seika and Ran Houshun are far more impressive for showing up to the ceremonies without fail."

Virtuous Consort Ran shared her Maiden's petite stature and pretty face;

however, where Houshun was shy and timid, the consort was known for eating into her rivals with her venom-filled barbs and a smile on her face. Add the flamboyant and belligerent Pure Consort Kin into the mix, and their verbal assault was as toxic as it came.

“ ... ”

Worthy Consort Gen never spoke up in situations like these. Most of the time, she did nothing but rest her chin in her hands and stare into space. There was an elusive air about her peculiar to the Gen clan, and she felt detached from reality in a very different sense from the Kin clan’s artists. Today, too, she simply gazed at the rippling surface of her chrysanthemum tea like a sea-dwelling fish that couldn’t comprehend human speech.

“The Ghost Festival was lovely. I’m honored to have been a part of it.”

Noble Consort Shu, meanwhile, composed her elegant features into a faint smile and managed an innocuous comment. Though she never voiced insults, neither did she ever assert herself. The universal assessment of the beautiful consort was that she was a demure and gentle woman.

“How has Lady Reirin been? I heard she woke up, but little else,” Kasui broached in her deep voice, perhaps unable to abide by her own guardian’s deafening silence.

Much like any Gen clan woman, she possessed deadpan features and a taciturn disposition. Still, when compared to the impenetrable Worthy Consort, she came off as a good deal more sensible—and proved to be a natural worrier, at that.

“Me too. Every other time Miss Reirin has fainted, she’s been fine the next day. If she’s still confined to bed, I’m worried it’s something really serious this time,” Houshun nervously added, relieved that the conversation had at last been steered toward something a little less noxious.

One look at the adorable Maiden and her squirrel-like expression struck Kenshuu with the urge to give her an acorn. All members of the Kou clan shared a fondness for small, cute animals.

“Sorry for the alarm, girls. Tousetsu, Reirin’s head court lady, informed me

that she's already back on her feet. But her attendants love to fuss, see. They've been clamoring for her to rest until she makes a complete recovery. She's stuck in confinement, that's all. Nothing to worry about."

"She's stuck in confinement..."

"And that's *all*?"

The Maidens each pulled a face at the unsettling choice of words, but they seemed to buy the explanation. The Kou court ladies' adoration and worship of Reirin was a well-known fact.

"That's certainly a relief to hear. But considering how often Lady Reirin gets sick, it could be difficult for her to make appearances at Maiden Court if she's put under house arrest each time she catches a cold," Kin Reiga purred. Just when the mood had shifted to something more appropriate for a "check-in," she dragged the conversation back to the previous topic. "The Maidens will each go on to serve the emperor as one of his consorts. It's not enough to win his affections; she has to be able to provide him pleasure and bear him a child. With all due respect, I have my concerns as a fellow consort: Does Lady Reirin *have* that sort of stamina?"

The Pure Consort made a show of savoring the tea's aroma, narrowing her gaze in insinuation.

"Both His Majesty and His Highness are incarnations of the dragon, teeming with boundless yang qi. It calls for a good deal of strength from the 'yin' half to take that load. Speaking from experience, I've been feeling exhausted with how often I've been summoned to His Majesty's palace as of late... It was rather hard on me when we had such an important ceremony coming up."

The rest of the consorts winced. However much she couched it in euphemisms, she was digging into a very intimate topic. What she was saying essentially boiled down to this: "The men of the imperial family have so much stamina that it's tough to serve as their bedmate." It was a fact that her good looks and open pursuit of her desires had made her a preferred companion of the emperor's, which granted her the most opportunities to attend his bedchamber of all four consorts. In other words, she was both appraising Reirin in salacious terms and boasting about her own good standing in the same

breath.

“Aunt Reiga, please...”

The Maidens were red up to their ears, unaccustomed to this sort of talk, and Seika was shooting her aunt a look that could kill. Though her showy appearance could give the wrong impression, the Kin girl’s upright nature made her adverse to anything so indecent as discussing bedroom affairs before an audience.

As an aside, while the talk of their shared husband was one thing, Kenshoo wasn’t sure how she felt about her son’s sex life becoming a topic of open debate. She regarded the tension in the air with a snort. What would the ideal empress do in a situation like this? Probably scold the Pure Consort for her comments and steer the increasingly lewd conversation back on course. Too bad—that wasn’t her style at all.

“That sounds rough, Consort Kin. Now that you mention it, His Majesty mentioned something along those lines to me. He told me what a superlative partner you are—well, except for the part where you make a little too much noise. Oh, and he complained that you’re always looking for something to do with your hands.”

Every single woman who had taken a sip of tea to break the awkward tension nearly spat it back out again.

“*Huh?!*” Reiga froze up, forgetting all semblance of decorum.

“I know your goal is to get him going, but I can’t say I approve of you shouting so much when His Majesty is trying to concentrate. Have you considered that it might be your own fault you’re always so tired? He hasn’t said anything, but I can tell His Majesty is losing interest. If you’re supposed to be the ‘Pure’ Consort, why don’t you try acting like it?”

“Wh... Wha... Wha...”

If someone got vulgar with her, she’d hit them back with twice the vulgarity. It was Kenshoo’s *modus operandi* to retaliate against those little needles of sarcasm by swinging down a giant hatchet. The sheer destructive force of her surprise frontal attack had Pure Consort Kin tearing up.

“Wh-what distasteful talk to be having in broad daylight...!”

“Excuse me? I was talking about a game of Go. Don’t you ever play a match when you get summoned to His Majesty’s palace?”

In a rare showing from Kenshuu, that one was a veiled insult. Left unspoken was: “Or maybe he’d never invite you to join him in such an intellectual game.”

“Hah! Get your mind out of the gutter, you debauchee.”

Next came an out-and-out attack—no metaphors to hide it. This approach definitely suited her best.

When a laugh rumbled in Kenshuu’s throat, Pure Consort Kin balled her hands into trembling fists and snapped, “Why, the nerve of the *empress* to say anything so—”

“Kin Reiga.”

When she saw that the woman had enough fight left in her to be crying sour grapes, Kenshuu growled her name. The chill in her voice was enough to drop the temperature of the room several degrees, and it drew a gulp not only from Consort Kin herself but from all those present.

“I agree with His Majesty. Sometimes your voice grates on my nerves.”

She had a deep voice for a woman. Silence echoed in the dignified presence of the empress, the head of the imperial consorts and the mother of the nation.

“Perhaps you only mean to chirp a harmless little tune, but those shrill notes can become poison to the weak. This is supposed to be a check-in, if you’ll recall—so keep your unpleasant remarks to yourself. Unless you want me to toss you out into the street?”

“...”

It couldn’t have been more straightforward a threat. As someone only used to dealing in roundabout insults, Pure Consort Kin was trembling.

Empress Kenshuu was the unpretentious sort. She was amicable, broad-minded, and largely unconcerned with proper etiquette. Her tendency to leave women to their gossip led some to believe that, in a sense, they could get away with anything around her.

But at the end of the day, she was still the empress. Her power was absolute; it would be a simple matter for her to have even one of the four consorts ejected from the court with nothing to her name. All it would take was incurring her displeasure even once.

“Please excuse the Pure Consort’s disrespect. I offer my humble apologies on behalf of the Kin clan,” said Seika in the place of her speechless aunt. She looked horrified. “There is nothing more insufferable than the cry of an animal in heat. Nevertheless, driving it from its cage would only lead more people to suffer its din. As the leader of the consorts and the keeper of the coop, I implore you to discipline our hopeless bird within the confines of its home.”

“Hah!”

It was another way of saying, *Please don’t banish her, but feel free to put my obnoxious aunt under house arrest.* Kenshuu had to chuckle at how Seika’s attempt at mediation involved her openly throwing Reiga to the wolves.

The empress was well aware of the Kin clan’s history. She had a fondness for the principled Seika and her distaste for her more cunning relatives. Kenshuu was Kou Reirin’s guardian, but she was also the leader of the entire inner court. While there was no question of how much she adored her niece, it was her duty to look after *all* the Maidens as their empress.

“You’re a bold one, Kin Seika. You would dare imply that a consort—and your own guardian, at that—is a bird in heat?”

“Yes. The Pure Consort tends to push her way to center stage without consideration to who the real main act is. Those who live in ignorance of their own rank and abilities are no better than a bunch of animals.”

“Consider yourself lucky to have such a reliable Maiden, Pure Consort Kin. I’ll overlook this little incident in light of Kin Seika’s scruples.”

“I thank you for your generosity, Your Majesty,” Reiga forced out through teeth clenched in anger, hanging her head.

It was then that Kenshuu caught Seika’s eyes blazing with triumph, at which she arched an eyebrow. The girl was principled—but she still had a lot to learn. It was all well and good to be spirited, but getting a big head about

overstepping her consort was a habit that needed curbing.

With a rueful smile, Kenshoo decided it was time to tell a tale of old times. It would have the added bonus of pacifying the Pure Consort after she had gone overboard with her reprimands too.

“In all fairness, I can understand why Pure Consort Kin might struggle to show me proper respect. Back during our Maiden Court days, no one could have predicted that I would be the one appointed empress.”

“Wow...”

“Really?”

The Maidens blinked, surprised to hear this given how little they knew of their consorts’ time in the Maiden Court.

Kenshoo’s grin widened, endeared by the subtle way the girls sat up straighter in their seats to listen. “Absolutely. I didn’t have a shred of interest in embroidery, poetry, or any of the other pursuits a woman is supposed to be good at. And that’s not getting into the fact that I was the oldest Maiden in the court. If anything, I was an outcast—past my prime, disagreeable, and uninterested in honing my more feminine qualities.”

To be more exact, Kenshoo had never been treated as a failure. She had been praised for her natural ability in various fields: She could recite the Five Classics after scanning them over once, beat even the grand chancellor in a game of Go, and ride a horse or wield a sword with ease. Her talents were simply not what anyone was looking for in a Maiden.

Though she was intelligent, she recited poems like they were manifestos, and though she was a skilled dancer, it was said that she moved with the force of a wrathful god rather than a noblewoman and that a *khakkhara* staff looked like a club in her hands.

Both she and the rest of the Kou clan had expected this to happen from day one, and if everything had gone according to plan, it would have been her younger sister—another woman named Seishoo—who became their Maiden. However, right before Seishoo was supposed to leave for the court, she had met the love of her life and set out to elope with him. Given how much the

whole clan adored the youngest daughter, they had shelved their plans to send her to the court, given her their blessing to get married, and sent Kenshuu in her stead. Seeing as that had ruined Kenshuu's plans to become the first female government official, she turned out to be a problem child who would skip ceremonies and tea parties out of pure spite.

"That takes me back. I remember that sparring in the courtyard with Worthy Consort Gen would be the sole bright spot in my day... Even the old captain of the Eagle Eyes was scared stiff of our teamwork. Isn't that right, Gousetsu?"

"It is as you say," said the Worthy Consort upon hearing her name, smiling for the first time in the whole conversation. "I recall that the gardener would often cry and beg us not to knock down his trees."

"Ha ha!" Kenshuu laughed.

The Maidens exchanged serious glances, shocked to learn about their guardians' hidden pasts.

"His Majesty prefers ladylike women. That meant Gousetsu and I were basically locked in competition for the seat of the Worthy Consort. The Maiden who shone the brightest back then was Noble Consort Shu, for sure. Her visage was as gorgeous as a peony. She was compassionate, virtuous, and elegant. Didn't everyone used to call her the prince's 'cotton rose'?"

The empress's gaze was soft with nostalgia, while Noble Consort Shu ducked her head bashfully. "Please... That's nothing but flattery. You'll make me blush."

One look at her refined manner and knack for triggering the protective instinct made everything click into place for the Maidens: In short, it was Noble Consort Shu who had been the Kou Reirin of the previous generation.

The Shu Maiden had been the favorite, and the Kou Maiden had been an outcast. That those roles had been completely reversed in the current generation showed how unpredictable the whims of fate could be.

"Flattery? Hardly. If it weren't for your intervention, there's no telling if I would have stuck around in the Maiden Court."

Kenshuu gazed tenderly at the Noble Consort. This was the woman who had once been called the ever-beautiful "cotton rose" of the prince, the girl she had

been closest to in all of the Maiden Court. She was delicate and reserved—but every now and then, she offered a glimpse of the wild emotion so characteristic of the Shu clan.

“How many years has it been since our Maiden Court days?” Kenshuu muttered to herself, pulling her teacup closer. As she savored the aroma wafting from the chrysanthemum tea, she briefly reflected on those bygone times.

“Goodness, Lady Kenshuu! What on earth are you doing?”

One summer day, Kenshuu had climbed up to the roof of the Maiden Court to bask in the sun. It happened to be the middle of the day, when the sunshine was beating down its hardest. To make matters worse, the light and heat reflected from the tiles were almost blinding, making it both an unbearably hot and dangerous spot to lie down.

“Spending too much time in the sun can cause headaches and dizziness bad enough to lay a person flat,” came Kenshuu’s lazy reply. “I was hoping that if I slept out here for half an hour, I might get sick enough to skip tomorrow’s Double Sevens ceremony.”

“Would you please refrain from endangering yourself for such ridiculous reasons?”

The Maiden leaning over the court’s balustrade—Shu Gabi—furrowed her gorgeous features into a frown. Most of the time, she was a mild-mannered girl with gentle, droopy eyes, but in situations like these, she would dive into lectures with a stern rebuke in her voice and gaze.

“Do you have any idea how scared I was when I spotted you on the roof from the Shu Palace cloister? Sleeping in this heat could kill you, and I needn’t even mention the risk of falling!”

“No Kou in existence would die from a little heat or cold. I’m not an untrained weakling like you.”

“Perhaps *you’ll* be all right, but your gamboge golds are falling to pieces for the fright you’ve given them. The poor things were looking for you with faces

white as death. Come now!”

When Gabi went so far as to tug on her *ruqun* as she nagged her to get up from the roof, Kenshuu had no choice but to give up on her nap. She glided down onto the balustrade with the agile moves of a military officer.

“You wouldn’t understand how I feel,” she said with a bitter shrug of her shoulders. “It’s easy for *you* to look forward to the embroidery competition of the Double Sevens Festival. Everyone raves about how with a needle in your hand, you can stitch together the most picturesque of views. But what am I supposed to do when I’ve never held a blade thinner than a dagger? Ever since those blasted gamboge golds got a look at the length of silk I slaved over, they’ve been spending the last three days crying, ‘I’d rather bite off my own tongue than show His Highness this *travesty*.’”

“How bad does your embroidery have to be to make your court ladies cry?” asked Gabi, appalled—only to be rendered speechless by what Kenshuu fished from the breast of her garment.

It was a wrinkled and crimped length of silk with a grid of cords thick enough to look like rope glued over top of it.

“What...is this?”

“I tried to depict the yin-yang symbol in a linear composition. This black string is supposed to be yin, and the white string is yang.”

“I have a lot of questions, but I’ll start with this one: Why did you use cords in embroidery?”

“I’m not patient enough to bother with tons of tiny stitches. I figured I could cover more space with bigger threads, so I landed on using cords.”

When she tacked on “You should be proud that I didn’t go with straw rope” with a completely straight face, Gabi had to rub her temples.

“I don’t see *any* stitches here—you pasted everything on! What happened to the needle part of your so-called ‘needlework’?”

“Fool. How am I supposed to thread such a thick cord through the eye of a needle? I didn’t think I’d need to explain that one.”

Despite Kenshuu's gall to call *her* the fool, Gabi burst out laughing. Perhaps it was because her friend had sounded so charming and good-natured about it.

"But still, Lady Kenshuu... While I'm aware that you do in fact excel in all manner of arts, after your dance the other day, bungling the Double Sevens Festival will further serve to earn you the other Maidens' ridicule. At this rate, you really are going to end up the Worthy Consort. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Nope," Kenshuu answered, the picture of indifference. "I wanted to be a civil servant—someone who protects the people and nurtures the land. The 'four consorts' is just a fancy name for a bunch of mistresses. What's the point in competing for the top rank? I guess I'd be up for becoming the almighty empress, mother of our nation...but we've already got *you* to fill that role."

She acknowledged another Maiden as the empress without the slightest hesitation.

Gabi gave an embarrassed smile. "Only His Highness and Her Majesty can know if I am indeed to be our future empress...but I still don't want you to take the lowest rank."

With that, she took a carefully folded length of silk from her immaculate robe. Unraveling it revealed an extravagant qilin pattern sewn into the cloth.

"I embroidered this with the Kou clan's beloved qilin. Go ahead and show it off at the ceremony tomorrow. I'm sure it will encourage that gossipy Lady Reiga and wily Lady Hourin to keep their mouths shut for a while." Gabi's gentle eyes brimmed with both undiluted empathy and a strong will. "I am humbled to have the prince's favor. If I am indeed so lucky as to be chosen as his empress, I want you to be my right-hand woman as the Noble Consort. You have no idea how much solace your sincerity and earnestness has given one as weak-minded as myself."

The beautiful daughter of the Shus was the youngest of the Maidens. That, combined with her modest bearing, had once made her the target of the other girl's scorn. During those days, Gabi had come to idolize Kenshuu, who managed to stand apart from the crowd while still taking all things in stride.

As Gabi gazed straight at her with those eyes as pure as a celestial maiden's, Kenshuu let slip a chuckle. "You? Weak-minded? You must be kidding." She

took the silk Gabi had embroidered and traced its intricate threads with her finger. “A person’s character shines through their needlework. Your embroidery is plenty elegant, but your choice of colors is bold. The fabric gets stiffer the more overlapping threads you have, yet still you add layer after layer of color. However fragile you look, you’ve got the backbone and relentlessness to punch your needle through a tough piece of cloth over and over again.”

“My. I should be offended.”

“Am I wrong, though? You may look delicate and graceful at a glance, but you’re actually an implacable, impassioned woman who won’t stop until you accomplish whatever task you’ve set your mind to.” With a flap of the silk in her hands, Kenshuu lifted the corners of her mouth in a grin. “But that’s what I like about you. You’re just like my little sister.”

“Your sister... Lady Seishuu, you mean? I’ve heard that she’s a delicate, well-bred lady who wouldn’t even harm an insect.”

“Yeah. She’s always crying over nothing, but she can be shockingly stubborn too. Sound familiar?”

Kenshuu’s amused smile drew a sigh from Gabi. She wasn’t sure what kind of expression she ought to be making.

“Your opinions of me aside, I do hope you will find my embroidery useful.”

“Nah, I’m not planning on using this. I hate to say it, but seeing a delinquent like me break out such exquisite embroidery would just make everyone suspicious. Besides, it would be a waste to share this with that jerk. I’m going to make this my handkerchief,” Kenshuu declared, folding up the silk surprisingly neatly and planting a mischievous kiss upon it.

Gabi was taken aback. “That ‘jerk’? That’s no way to speak of our future emperor. Taciturn though he is, His Highness is a kindhearted man, both strong and wise, who cares deeply for his Maidens.”

“Sorry, but Kous don’t like to be pampered. We want to be the ones doing the pampering,” the older girl responded, unabashed, and then clapped her hands in a sudden epiphany. “Still, accepting your gift means I can’t forget to return the favor. What would you like? A sword? A spear? Or how about a bow?”

“Why do I only get a choice of weapons? Should I take this as a threat?”

“Fool. Don’t you know the true significance of giving someone a weapon? It means that even if we’re too far apart for me to rush to your side, I’m still thinking of you and protecting you in the form of a blade or a bow. There’s no better symbol of friendship.”

“Mm-hmm.” Gabi curtly dismissed her nonsensical logic. “I see. Then go right ahead, if you so desire. But don’t feel like you have to give me the thank-you weapon today. You’re welcome to hold off until next week, next year, or even the next life.”

“See that? I *knew* you had backbone.”

When Kenshoo had to point out her own sass to her, sulking, Gabi blinked and went, “Oh dear.”

The pair then burst out laughing in unison. There had once been a time of such peace in the court—when the girls could spend their days giggling together beneath the rays of summer sun.

The empress was to be the graceful and benevolent Shu Gabi. The Noble Consort would be the broad-minded and flamboyant Kin Reiga. Ran Hourin would be the Pure Consort, Gen Gousetsu would be the Virtuous Consort, and coming in at the lowest rank would be Kou Kenshoo, who had no desire to prosper in the role. The future hierarchy of the five had been so clear to see that it paradoxically brought harmony to the Maiden Court.

But one day—just as the season was about to change from summer to fall—an unforeseen disaster shook the Maiden Court to its core.

“A plague?!”

The Eagle Eye’s unsettling piece of news came when the five Maidens were gathered in one room to plan for an upcoming harvest rite. Word had it that Genyou, the crown prince of the time, had fallen sick upon making a sympathy call to a flood-stricken region. He had begun to vomit incessantly about three days after his return to the capital, and by this stage, he was even passing blood in his stool. His face was ashen, and he had been unable to sleep due to the severity of his abdominal pain.

“At first we thought he might have been exposed to contaminated water, but his symptoms have been too severe for that. He is in no condition to take the medicine the apothecary brewed for him, so all we can do is have faith in his resilience while we make every effort to expel the poisoned qi inside him. We must implore you Maidens not to set foot outside your respective palaces for the time being.”

According to the Eagle Eye, the first page to have tended the retching prince’s bedside had begun to exhibit the same symptoms a day ago. The Maidens had been instructed to quarantine in their palaces for fear that the sickness was contagious. There was no telling what the vector of the poisoned qi had been. Anyone who had come into contact with the prince’s skin, breathed his air, or eaten with him over the past few days was ordered to rest lest they come down with the same ailment.

“N-no way...!”

“I accompanied him on a walk through the gardens only a few days ago!”

The girls trembled in fear. The thought of the dashing prince moaning in pain and excreting blood was frightening enough on its own, but the knowledge that they could end up meeting the same fate was even more harrowing.

Reiga and Hourin ran back to their palaces and dove under the covers so fast, it was like they had completely forgotten their daily oh-so-demure promises to offer up their whole lives to their prince. Gousetsu decided to hole up in a storehouse of the Palace of the Darkest Edge, keeping her distance from her court ladies. Though Gabi cast a wistful glance toward the main palace where the prince lived, her court ladies came to usher her back to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

Only one girl stood her ground.

“Lady Kenshuu...?”

“Hey, Eagle Eye,” she said with a stern look on her face. “You said you’re counting on His Highness’s resilience and working to expel the poisoned qi. How come you haven’t forced him to take his medicine?”

“Well, erm... Our previous attempts have led to His Highness writhing in pain

and lashing out at us, see...”

“With all those military officials around, how hard can it be to hold down one slip of a man? I bet the truth is that you’re all scared of touching His Highness’s blood or poisoned qi or whatever it is.”

She’d hit the nail on the head hard enough to strike the Eagle Eye speechless. That silence of his was an answer in itself.

Kenshuu heaved a sigh of disgust and turned on her heel. She wasn’t headed in the direction of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, however. She was bound for the prince’s residence of the main palace.

“Lady Kenshuu!” Gabi called out to her in surprise. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to nurse him back to health,” replied Kenshuu, casting a casual glance over her shoulder. “I’m off to clean up the mess—*literally*—of that poor man abandoned by both his retainers and his women.”

“But what if something happens to—”

“You think my fighting spirit and backbone would lose to a little feces?” She returned Gabi’s protests with a shrug of her shoulders. Then, her gaze abruptly softened. “It’s a wife’s duty to protect her husband to the end. I’ve got no intention of pleasuring a man as his mistress, but I’m fully prepared to lay down my life for my groom. Isn’t that what a Maiden is supposed to do?”

Her matter-of-fact delivery stole the breath of all those present.

The Maidens were supposed to be the flowers of the eponymous court—the beautiful women meant to bring the crown prince comfort. Compared to the general understanding of what the role entailed, the wifely duties of which Kenshuu spoke held a much heftier weight. Everyone watched in silence as she strode off to the main palace as naturally as if she were returning to her own room.

Kenshuu stayed in the main palace and took care of the prince for a full week after that.

For all her talk of fighting spirit and backbone, she approached the task with

great care and consideration. She found out which of the prince's pages had invalids, children, or elders among their families and allowed them to leave the palace. Rather than force the attendants to keep long hours on duty to no real purpose, she ordered them to get plenty of food and rest, and she held herself to the same standards as she nursed her patient back to health. She would wash her hands constantly, hold the prince down herself and force him to take his medicine, and then sterilize or wash whatever had been contaminated as many times as it took.

It was her meticulous nursing job that saved the prince from losing all the fluids in his body and allowed him to recover at last.

When the previous emperor decided to abdicate a few months later, the crown prince succeeded the imperial throne and each of the Maidens was appointed to her new role. From highest to lowest, the consorts were ranked in the following order: Shu Gabi, Kin Reiga, Ran Hourin, and Gen Gousetsu. Finally, it was Kenshoo who was granted the title of "empress."

During her enthronement ceremony, the emperor's explanation as to why she was fit to become "the mother of the nation" had the entire audience nodding their heads in agreement.

As the aroma wafting from her chrysanthemum tea diffused into the air, Kenshoo realized that she had gotten lost in thought and blinked herself back to her senses.

"Well, anyway... The point is, hierarchy of the inner court women is a fragile thing that could be overturned at any moment. Those at the bottom have to respect those on the top, but the latter shouldn't look down on the former. Whatever your status, it's important to show respect for one another," she said in conclusion to her story and then took a sip of her tea.

Grateful that the empress had jumped to her defense and let her save a little face, Pure Consort Kin breathed a sigh of relief and chimed in with some flattery. "It's as you say, Your Majesty! Oh, but *your* position alone is unshakable. After all, you're the only one among us who managed to birth a prince as wonderful as His High—"

Crash!

Kenshoo immediately threw her teacup on the floor, drawing a jolt of surprise from the Pure Consort.

“Whoops. My hand slipped.”

It was almost impressive how deadpan her delivery was.

“A broken teacup during a get-well visit is a bad omen,” she went on. “I’m sorry to do this when you all went out of your way to be here, but let’s adjourn for now.”

“Wha...?”

The women were rattled by Kenshoo’s decision to end the tea party far sooner than anticipated.

“Um... Did I say somethi—”

“Oh, right. I prepared you girls a token of thanks for your get-well presents. I laid out some fabrics in the other room, so feel free to take whichever pattern suits you best. Keep looking out for Reirin, will you?”

Reiga had attempted to inquire what the problem was with a strained smile, but Kenshoo ignored her to focus on chasing the Maidens out. Next, she sent the stunned Pure Consort and Virtuous Consort packing with a single raise of her eyebrow that said, *What are you still doing here?* Worthy Consort Gen soon bobbed her head in silence and exited the room, leaving only Noble Consort Shu behind.

The beautiful consort pushed her teacup toward the center of the table in a graceful motion and then stood from her seat.

“Did you do that for me?” she asked in a quiet, ladylike voice.

As her court ladies brought her a fresh new cup of tea, Kenshoo only averted her gaze and tersely replied, “Do what?”

Noble Consort Shu stared long and hard at the empress as she savored the aroma of her chrysanthemum tea. Then, at last, a subdued smile rose to her face and she dropped her gaze.

“Nothing.”

For some reason, she walked with a slight limp in her right leg as she left the room.

“I suppose that’s just the kind of person you are,” she added in a soft, low murmur.

“What could have made Her Majesty so angry?” Gen Kasui wondered with a frown. She and the two other Maidens were walking down the cloister on their way to the other room. “It was transparent flattery, to be sure, but Pure Consort Kin was only singing her praises.”

“Are you serious, Lady Kasui?” Seika snapped, idly twirling her fan in her hand. “It may have been a stillbirth, but Consort Shu had a son too. It was beyond rude of her to ignore that in her quest to kiss up to Her Majesty and save her own skin. Honestly, how disgraceful can one woman be?”

She couldn’t stomach the way Reiga pounced on rivals she saw as weak while cozying up to the ones she deemed formidable.

While Seika burned with a rage incandescent enough to put the rising temperatures to shame, the Ran clan’s Houshun squeaked, “But I wonder why Her Majesty got so mad about her disrespecting the Noble Consort. She only silenced her with words when she was insulting Lady Reirin, but she threw a teacup on the ground over Consort Shu. Yet it’s never seemed like Her Majesty and the Noble Consort were all that close before...”

Despite the minuscule volume of her voice, she raised a good point. Seika had explained that part away with “as the empress, she couldn’t tolerate a disruption of the hierarchy between the consorts,” but Houshun’s argument made her reconsider that assumption.

Seika drummed her fingers against her fan. “That’s fair... While she went out of her way to mention that Noble Consort Shu used to be the leader of the Maidens, it never *has* looked like the two of them get along especially well.”

“On the contrary—I heard that when Noble Consort Shu had a stillbirth, the rest of the consorts came to check on her right away, but Her Majesty didn’t

even send her a sympathy gift,” said Kasui, like that tidbit of information had only just occurred to her.

Seika snorted. “At least in our Pure Consort’s case, I’m sure that ‘check-in’ was nothing more than a malevolent excuse to rub salt in the wound. The empress may have determined that it was better not to bother.”

The Kin Maiden loved all things beautiful. While Empress Kenshuu didn’t boast the same exquisite combination of delicacy and tenacity as Kou Reirin, she had an awe-inspiring presence akin to an endless horizon. Seika would root for her over the despicable, cowardly Pure Consort any day.

Still, as she looked out over the rows of different-colored fabrics set out in the other room, her tone suddenly softened. “Or maybe...”

The women of the inner court vied for beauty, culture, and favor. They were constantly stacked up against one another, and there was a marked difference in their treatment right down to the very gifts they received. There were very few opportunities for them to get equal access to items of the exact same grade, like Kenshuu had given them now.

That was true even for the Maidens. Once they became consorts and were compared based on the frequency of their bedchamber visits or their success in bearing the emperor a child, it would be hard for any woman to maintain her composure.

“Even if they liked each other at first, the vortex of strife could have swallowed up their bond. Perhaps breaking that teacup was her final act of friendship toward a woman she’d drifted apart from.”

As the two other girls fell silent, Seika slipped past them to gently run her fingers over one of the fabrics. An exquisite pattern woven into the high-end silk, it was an article of the utmost beauty.

“I’ll be taking this white one.”

Seika was yet another who had weathered a full year in the Maiden Court. By the time she turned around, a shrewd smile had made its way back onto her face.

Kenshuu ruminated on the words Gabi had muttered under her breath as she left the room.

“I suppose that’s just the kind of person you are.”

“What kind of person do I look like to you, I wonder?” she scoffed in self-derision, resting her chin in one hand as she traced the rim of her teacup with the other.

She already knew the answer to her own question:

Cold.

She acted in the name of impartiality, punishing women who would disrupt the hierarchy but never offering a hand to the ones who had been hurt. Gabi’s assessment of her would be something along those lines, she assumed.

Should I have gone to comfort you back then, Gabi?

In what was a rare occurrence, Kenshuu thought back on old times with a grimace.

What came to mind was one freezing winter day, a mere week before Kenshuu would go on to give birth to Gyomei. Noble Consort Shu—who had conceived around the same time as her but been due to deliver a month later—had gone into premature labor and ultimately given birth to a stillborn son.

For that period of time when the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion was shrouded in black banners and flooded with sympathy gifts and condolences from every palace in the court, Kenshuu never once attempted to speak to her. After all, what could she even say? Gabi had suffered a difficult pregnancy, while Kenshuu had been all but guaranteed an easy delivery. Gabi was said to have made every effort to have a son, but Kenshuu had fallen pregnant without particularly trying for it. Above all else, Gabi’s son was dead, and the child in Kenshuu’s womb was still alive and well.

Whatever sympathies Kenshuu could offer would do nothing but hurt her.

Were Kenshuu such a simple thing as a blade, it would be easy to judge its sharpness and its threat. But she was a poison, so there was no telling how deeply she would seep into the woman’s spirit. Afraid of hurting her friend, the

empress had made a point of keeping her distance from Gabi. Behind the scenes, she did everything in her power to ensure that the prince's funeral was an elaborate affair, that firewood was delivered to the Shu Palace, and that they had plenty of skilled cooks on hand, but she was careful to keep all her contributions anonymous.

Yet even as time passed, the brokenhearted Noble Consort failed to bounce back, until at last she reached the point where she couldn't even get up from the floor. In the midst of all this, Kenshuu's own delivery date arrived.

Knowing that the vigorous cries of her newborn son and the cheers of the court ladies and eunuchs echoing from the Kou Palace must have reached Gabi where she lay in her darkened chambers, Kenshuu could hardly bear to celebrate her own auspicious day.

On the third day after she had given birth, Pure Consort Kin came to offer her congratulations with a fake smile plastered on her face.

"Congratulations! The moment His Highness was born, even one as ignorant as myself could feel the roar of his dragon's qi shake the capital. No doubt he came into this world taking all the yang qi around him into his own body."

Still sore about her loss of the Noble Consort title, she gazed enviously upon the child Kenshuu had borne. Then with an exaggerated tilt of her head, she went on, "It's a shame about what happened to Noble Consort Shu, but a great flower blooms at the expense of those that were culled, and a ruler lays out his throne upon a pile of corpses. I'm sure His Highness has been endowed with the providence of the late prince, so if you ask me, she ought to love your son as if he were her own."

That comment made Kenshuu furious enough to see red.

Pure Consort Kin was suggesting that it was Gyoumei and his strong dragon's qi that had robbed the Noble Consort's son of his fortune. It was likely a snide remark meant to put a damper on Kenshuu's celebration, but the empress took greater offense to the woman's insensitivity than the insult leveled against her.

"Why, you...! You better not have said that to Noble Consort Shu's face!"

"Whyever are you so angry? I'm simply singing the praises of the esteemed

prince blessed with the dragon's qi and the lucky empress who birthed him. Compliments ought to be given freely, wouldn't you agree?"

In other words, she had absolutely made the same nasty comments to Noble Consort Shu.

Hiding her mouth behind her round fan, Reiga smiled. Kenshuu was so livid that she almost got up to strangle the woman with the umbilical cord enshrined on the altar, but what she heard next changed her mind.

"But I must say, Consort Shu is much pettier than I thought. After I extolled the wonders of His Highness's dragon's qi, she looked so incensed that I worried she might just place a curse on you. Oh, and when I mentioned that you were the only one who had yet to come see her, she slammed her pillow against the floor in the heat of her anger. Why, I'd never seen her behave that way before," the Pure Consort went on with a shrug of her shoulders.

Kenshuu stared back at her. Her intention had probably been to throw it in the empress's face that she'd destroyed her friendship with Gabi—that she'd driven the disconsolate Noble Consort even deeper into despair and then shifted the blame onto Kenshuu.

And yet...

She threw her pillow? Gabi actually picked herself up off the floor and swung it down with her own arms?

It was in that moment that Kenshuu realized what Shu Gabi truly needed: someone to blame.

No woman who loved like a Shu would simply move on from the death of a child she'd held in her womb for almost ten months. What she needed wasn't comfort but a hatred strong enough to use as a crutch. She needed the flames of resentment to set her heart so fiercely ablaze that its heat would course through her entire body.

"You heard me—the Noble Consort twisted her beautiful face into a hideous expression and spoke ill of *you*, the empress! I understand why she's upset, but I'd argue that crosses a line."

"I see."

Kenshuu gazed down at the brilliant handkerchief in which she had swaddled the peacefully slumbering prince. The silk was looking wrinkled after she had clutched it so many times to ride out the painful contractions of her labor.

Keep hold of your needle, Gabi, she said to her friend in her mind—to the woman who must have punctured that stiff fabric countless times on that brilliant summer day. *It can be a grudge, or it can be hatred—burn with whatever it takes to keep those hands of yours moving.*

No matter how wrinkled or muddied the silk became, no pattern could ever take shape unless she continued to layer her threads.

I can be the one you stab your needle through.

Paying no heed to the venom the Pure Consort continued to spew, Kenshuu asked one of her court ladies to see the woman removed from her chambers.

“Say, Gabi. Are you still stitching the pattern of your grudge?” Kenshuu muttered to herself, staring down at the chrysanthemum tea that had begun to cool.



Twenty years had passed since then.

At first she hoped that, much like a wounded patient eventually casts off their brace or cane, Consort Shu would one day learn to let go of her resentment—but if anything, it seemed to her that the woman’s grudge had only grown stronger with time.

Kenshū’s son, Gyōmei, had grown into a handsome young man who excelled in both the literary and military arts. The more acclaim he earned by flawlessly carrying out his duties as the crown prince, the more Consort Shu was tormented by the fact that she had lost her own son.

Kenshū wanted nothing more than to grab the woman by the collar and force her to spit out her true feelings—but ever since she had given birth to an heir and solidified her position as the empress, a frosty distance had crystallized between them that even *she* hesitated to overstep.

Heaving a deep sigh, Kenshū rose to her feet.

Now that she had freed herself from that awful tea party, it was time to pay her beloved Maiden a visit. Even if Tōsetsu had confined her to her room, it was in her cute, reckless niece’s nature to push herself the hardest when she was on the mend.

“Honestly... That’s exactly why you’re never in good health, Reirin.”

She broke into a smile as she thought of her charge.

Reirin was Kenshū’s sickly little niece. When she first appointed the girl to be her Maiden, her frail constitution had drawn concerns from some members of the Kō clan, but Kenshū had shut them down with, “Reirin is fine this way.”

Yes. She was fine this way.

Though I have to say, she has been acting a little strange lately...

All of a sudden, Kenshū frowned as she felt a heavy haze settle over her chest. She assumed it was a side effect of all the uncharacteristic brooding she’d been doing, but after walking a few more steps, she realized that it was something else.

The pain in her chest spread to the rest of her body in an instant, much like

drops of ink drawing foreboding swirls on a water's surface. She felt herself break out into a clammy sweat as the blood drained to her feet. It was hard to breathe.

“Ggh...”

Her chest hurt.

Eyes wide with shock and both hands clawing at her breast, Kenshuu collapsed on the spot.

“Your Majesty?!”

“Lady Kenshuu?!”

The gamboge golds who had been attending her rushed to her side, alarmed.

As she listened to the distant, dismayed cries of the women who were usually known for their composure, Kenshuu faded out of consciousness.

Shkkt!

Right before she blacked out, the footsteps of a spider rang in her ears.

Chapter 4:

Reirin Wakes Up

REIRIN AWOKE WITH A START, snatched from the oblivion of sleep by an invisible hand. She cast a dazed look around her surroundings out of habit, her cheek bathed in the sunlight streaming in from the hollowed-out window.

What time was it? Noon. Judging by the sun's position in the sky, it was close to the hour of the snake.

Why was she asleep? Because she'd collapsed at the archery range. No, not long after that, she had woken up in the middle of the night to a visit from Tousetsu.

Yes, I remember now! I calmed her down and then went back to sleep. Oh dear... I'd meant to get up first thing in the morning, but it would seem I oversle

—

Wait, no.

Reirin's eyes flew open in surprise as she caught a glimpse of the bamboo growing in a corner of the storehouse. Based on her observations over the past few days, that bamboo grew at a rate of almost a foot a day. Given that she had cut it only the day before yesterday, it shouldn't have been taller than two feet off the floor, but it had already grown to the height of a child.

"Wha...? Huh?!"

That meant at least two days had passed since she'd seen it last. In other words, Reirin had slept for almost an entire day. This wasn't the day after the Ghost Festival but *two* days later.

"I can't believe it!"

Reirin sprang to her feet on instinct, clamping both hands over her mouth. Neither the body she'd dragged out of bed nor the arms she'd lifted to her face felt heavy or numb. Her resilience defied all expectations.

I-Is this what it means to be healthy?! I passed out after exhausting my

energy, yet still I had the strength left to sleep soundly for a whole day and night! Amazing!

Speaking as the prime example of a weak constitution, Reirin would argue that an excess of frailty made it difficult even to sleep without interruption. She considered it a downright miracle that she could sleep like a log—with nothing to eat or drink in the meantime—and wake up back at full health.

What's more, the moment she got up, her stomach gave a forlorn little rumble. Reirin nearly gave a whoop of joy upon hearing the unfamiliar sound.

I'm...hungry!

Only a truly dependable body could work up an appetite so soon after she had regained consciousness. Smitten, she gave her—or rather, Shu Keigetsu's—tummy an enthusiastic rub.

“You're hungry, huh?! Hee hee... Hee hee hee! There's a good girl! Do you want some potatoes? You do, don't you?! Aww, you little rascal!”

She felt *incredible*. No dizziness or nausea, and her entire body was brimming with energy. Her palm still stung, but that was nothing. As she blushed and fought down the smile threatening to creep over her face, she suddenly heard the moan of a beast disturbed from its hibernation coming from right behind her.

When she looked over her shoulder, she found that the sound came from none other than Leelee. The redhead was lying in a heap like someone who had passed out on the street, her head resting atop the straw bed in which Reirin had slept.

“L-Leelee? Are you all right?!”

“Ugh...”

Leelee grudgingly lifted her eyelids. She teetered to her feet with an ashen face, simply muttering, “Good. You're awake.” The bright, lovely eyes that had always been one of her best features were underscored with dark circles.

“Wh-what happened?” Reirin asked, concerned.

“Long story...” After taking a moment to stare into the middle distance, Leelee

slumped her face into her hands. “You’ve got to do something about that overzealous head court lady of yours.”

Her Maiden looked bewildered. “D-did Tousetsu do something?”

Leelee’s account went as follows:

Once Reirin passed out again, Leelee had wiped the sweat off her body, finished the laundry and preparations for the next morning’s breakfast, and then dove into the bed next to hers. She was exhausted after accompanying her mistress in a full day of bowstring-plucking, and more importantly, she needed to conserve her strength so she could jump into action if Reirin’s condition took a turn for the worse.

However, a mere half hour after Leelee had begun to doze off, a certain someone had cracked open the firmly shut door to the storehouse. Awoken by the moonlight pouring into the shed, Leelee had been astonished to discover the identity of the silhouette that stepped into view.

It was Tousetsu, who had come bearing bandages, cotton, alcohol, and a change of clothes.

When Leelee asked her why she hadn’t gone back to the Kou Palace, she responded that she *had*, but she had been too preoccupied with her mistress’s injuries to focus on her duties. She said that the injury to Reirin’s dominant hand meant she had done an inadequate job of stopping her own bleeding, that she was concerned whether the wounds had been properly disinfected, that she was beside herself worrying they might fester and wanted a chance to treat them—and so on, prattling on long enough to leave Leelee reeling.

In hindsight, while Leelee had washed out the wounds and wrapped Reirin’s hand in a cloth borrowed from the Eagle Eyes to stop the bleeding, she wasn’t confident that had been enough to suffice. Thus, she had reluctantly let Tousetsu into the shed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and insisting, “Once you’re done patching her up, please go back for real.”

“I see... So she kept you from getting a full night’s sleep. My apologies for all the trouble.”

“Oh, no. It got worse.”

Despite her promise that she would dress the wound and go, the moment she took a step inside the storehouse, Tousetsu had been struck speechless by its state of utter disrepair. Howling her remorse and her hatred of both herself and Shu Keigetsu for putting Reirin in such a ghastly situation, she had rendered her aid at a furious pace and taken off like the wind. Just when Leelee thought she had gone back to the Kou Palace, she had doubled back. And this time, she'd brought a whole mountain of high-end furnishings with her.

"All by herself?"

"Yes. That part was a little impressive, I have to admit. She made sure to carry everything over on her own so the other court ladies wouldn't find out."

Heaving a sigh, Leelee pointed to the dresser, mirror, desk, chairs, and vanity that had all been set up in a corner of the storehouse.

"And of course she enlisted my help in redecorating."

"I-I'm sorry," Reirin said. "I can't believe I slept through all this..."

"Hold on. It keeps going."

Leelee continued her story with a glazed look in her eyes.

Forced to join Tousetsu in a midnight decorating spree, Leelee's mood had already tanked from exhaustion. The head court lady was domineering, stubborn, and refused to listen to anyone who wasn't Reirin. When Leelee asked her to leave the rest for tomorrow, Tousetsu had insisted, "I can't leave Lady Reirin like this." When Leelee pointed out that Reirin had told her to do her actual job, she had argued, "I would normally be in bed at this hour—off duty, so to speak. I'm free to spend this time however I like."

"Enough already! It's against the rules for a Kou court lady to even *be* in the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion in the first place! Do you want to make trouble for your precious Maiden?!"

Once Leelee brought up the rule about palaces being off-limits to the other clans—or perhaps it was simply that Tousetsu hadn't wanted to incur her mistress's displeasure—the head court lady had finally left. After that, Leelee managed to get in two hours of peace and quiet—or rather, sleep—but around dawn, it got noisy outside.

When the redhead stepped out of the storehouse to see what was going on, she had found Tousetsu stirring a jar of cinnabar rust paint, having just finished piling a stack of sandbags.

“What are you doing?!”

Back in the present, Leelee said, “And then, wouldn’t you know it? Miss Head Court Lady told me that she’d moved the wall like it was no big deal.”

“What?”

“Each palace’s grounds extend to a wall painted in that clan’s respective color. The original wall next to this storehouse—the border with the Ran clan—has long been stripped of its cinnabar rust coat, so it didn’t count as a proper boundary. Thus, the wall she had just painted in cinnabar rust was the *real* border of the Shu Palace, which would make our storehouse neither Shu nor Ran territory but a common area like the Maiden Court. That was her argument, at least.”

Reirin had to groan at this account of her retainer’s insane logic. Apparently, Tousetsu had moved an entire wall just to make the argument that she could come and go from the common space as she pleased.

“My, what admirable stamina and backbone... I’d expect no less from Tousetsu.”

“Don’t look so impressed!”

Moving on: Tousetsu hadn’t hesitated to set foot in the “common area” of the storehouse from that point forward. She had come to check on Reirin in half-hour intervals, each time rousing Leelee from her sleep with one thing or another:

“How is Lady Reirin doing?”

“Here’s a fresh cloth for her hand.”

“She can use this spring water for her bath when she wakes.”

“This is her favorite seasoning.”

“Have these clothes.”

“Take this hairpiece.”

Fortunately, yesterday there had been a tea party meant to serve as a check-in for Kou Reirin—though Leelee and the real Reirin hadn’t been invited, of course—so Tousetsu had stopped showing up after that morning to help with the preparations.

The woman in question had complained, “Why must I leave Lady Reirin’s side to organize an event for that impostor?” For Leelee’s part, she was grateful to Keigetsu for the first time in her life for giving her the out.

“Anyway, I *thought* I could finally get in a nap that afternoon...”

Alas, Leelee’s calculations had once again been off the mark.

Thanks to Tousetsu turning the storehouse into a “common area,” the captain of the Eagle Eyes, his eunuchs, and even the Kin clan’s Seika had all shown up to check on “Shu Keigetsu.” In addition, the Gen clan and Ran clan had sent their own court ladies to obliquely inquire as to her well-being.

“All those people came to see me? Really?!”

“Yeah. I’m not sure why, but it seems like ‘Shu Keigetsu’s’ absence from that tea party actually won her some points, or got everyone worried, or something like that.”

Leelee had no idea how the rest of the Maidens had felt about that “check-in.”

The one thing she knew was that it had taken a tremendous amount of energy to field the influx of visitors all by herself. Everyone had come alone and staggered their visits so as to keep their storehouse check-in from becoming a topic of court gossip, which meant that the whole affair had eaten up a lot of time.

But the visitors had finally stopped coming in the evening, perhaps owed to the gradually worsening weather. Leelee had taken care of the unfinished chores that had piled up and collapsed into bed after midnight, which at last brought her tale up to date.

“By the way, each of the visitors brought something for you with an excuse

like, 'I'm not worried about Shu Keigetsu or anything; I just came to gawk at the villainess who passed out in an out-of-character fit of recklessness, and I figured it would be rude to show up empty-handed.' I left their gifts over there."

Leelee pointed to a corner of the warehouse, wobbling from sleep deprivation.

Unable to bear seeing her like this, Reirin said, "I'm so sorry for all the trouble, Leelee! I'll sort everything out and write the thank-you notes, so you ought to lie down. Shall I get you a steamed towel?"

"Stop trying to take care of me when *you're* injured!" Leelee admonished her on the spot, a menacing look on her face. "I'll have you know that according to the head court lady's estimate, it's going to take a month for your hand to fully heal! Your job for the day is to do nothing and get some rest!"

I don't get it.

Here Reirin had thought that her new body and reputation meant that no one else would have to worry about her. So why, in the end, did she have people fretting over her just as much as before? The girl reflected on the cruel whims of fate.

"In any case, it sounds like your efforts to keep Tousetsu in line were what saved the day. Thank you for that. Truly."

Despite her plethora of mixed feelings, Reirin straightened her posture and made sure to express her gratitude on that particular point.

Leelee's mouth twisted into an awkward half frown. "No need to thank me. If the truth got out, *I'd* be in trouble as a member of the Shu clan. I'm just looking out for myself."

"That's not..."

Reirin hated that she couldn't finish that sentence with "true."

Although Reirin had forbidden her from doing anything to Keigetsu or divulging the truth, it was plain to see that Tousetsu despised Keigetsu for her role in the switch. If she were to hint at the truth to the empress or Gyoumei in a way that didn't constitute a violation of her orders, the situation could get

dire fast—to the point that, in a worst-case scenario, extinction of the entire Shu line wouldn't be out of the question.

“Frankly, I'd never imagined that everyone was so overbeari—I mean, devoted. That was my mistake.” The look in her eyes growing distant, Reirin let out a sigh. “Back in the beginning, I thought that even if the matter came to light, it would be in the Kou spirit to let it pass with a helpless smile and a ‘Ha ha ha, you big troublemaker.’”

“Just how robust are the Kou clan's sensibilities, exactly?”

Leelee was past sighing; a mirthless smile rose to her lips.

In a flash of guilt, Reirin drew some water from a vat and held it out to her attendant, saying, “Here you go, Leelee.”

“Do I look like the injured one here?”

“No, but your smile looked so very dry that I wanted to wet your lips...”

“It's not my mouth that's withering, damn it! It's my soul!” Leelee was quick to fire off a comeback, but she nevertheless accepted the cup of water with a word of thanks.

Neither girl had had much of anything to eat for a while. Having a drink of water reminded Leelee just how hungry she was, and as a natural result, the pair decided to sit down for lunch. Of course, both Reirin and Leelee insisted on being the one to do the cooking, so in the end, they settled on partaking in the sweets from the pile of get-well gifts.

The girls moved the table Tousetsu had brought to the empty space beside the beds, then took their seats across from one another.

“These mooncakes were our gift from the Eagle Eyes' captain. Whoa, now that's sweet! Heh heh... I never would have guessed it, but do you think he might have a bit of a sweet tooth? Or did he pick these out because he thought *you* would like them?”

“Neither. I imagine these are part of the Eagle Eyes' provisions. They're incredibly filling and packed with ingredients, and the spices work to get the blood flowing. Just one of these could keep a man fighting for as long it takes!”

“Well, there goes the sentimental mood I was building.”

Not a beat was missed in their conversation, but that didn’t mean the two were on the same wavelength.

It was a peaceful meal nonetheless, until something left out on the table caught Reirin’s eye and made her hand go still. The subject of her gaze was a luscious bunch of grapes.

Even in the Kingdom of Ei, which was said to be a gathering of gourmets from all over the continent, it was rare to come across such magnificent-looking grapes. She knew at a glance that they had come from the Kin clan, who presided over the fertile season of autumn.

“Lady Kin Seika brought these in person,” Leelee said as she pointed to the grapes. A worried look crossing her features, she went on to add, “If you’d like, I can taste them for poison.”

“No need. It’s very difficult to poison fruit,” said Reirin with a shake of her head.

Upon picking a grape from the bunch, she carefully peeled the skin and popped it between her lips. Her mouth was soon filled with its fragrant juices and just a hint of acidity. Its high-class taste evoked images of Kin Seika herself.

“I don’t think Lady Seika had a hand in the hairpin debacle,” the Maiden said as she took her time gulping down the grapes. “In situations like these, she doesn’t hand out dazzling works of gold, but shows up in person to deliver fruit easy for a recovering patient to eat. It’s proof that she considers the recipient’s feelings when she picks out her gifts. I can’t imagine someone like that going through multiple court ladies to ruin another Maiden. If she likes someone, she’ll bring them fruit herself; if she doesn’t, she’ll douse them in water with her own two hands. That’s the sort of person she is.”

“When you put it like that, I see what you mean.”

Leelee gave a noncommittal nod, perhaps reflecting on Seika’s behavior at the Ghost Festival ceremony. She also found it hard to believe that someone who said, “Why not take a seat on the floor?” right in front of the prince would resort to such underhanded methods.

“Does that mean that the ivory silk who threatened me acted of her own accord? That, much like those court ladies who cut the string of your *khakkhara* staff, she went ahead based on assumptions of what her mistress would want?”

“I doubt Lady Seika wouldn’t know what such a deeply loyal court lady of hers was up to. Due to the Kin clan’s history, Pure Consort Kin and Lady Seika aren’t on the best of terms. It’s possible that the consort went over her head and gave the orders. Or else...” Reirin trailed off there, furrowing her brow.

Something didn’t sit right with her. The pragmatic Kin clan had used a low-ranking retainer of the Shu clan to curry favor with the Kous. While that made sense enough in concept, it felt wrong in light of all she knew about Seika’s character. But seeing as she couldn’t come up with an alternate explanation, the lingering sense of unease crept over her with nowhere else to go.

“I’m sorry, Leelee. I talked a big game about settling the score, but it doesn’t look like we’ll be resolving the matter of the hairpin anytime soon.”

“It’s fine!” said Leelee, flapping her hands in a fluster. “Honestly, I wouldn’t mind just letting the whole thing go. It’d be an issue if the Kins were still out to get you, but if they’ve yet to try anything else, I’m not too concerned.”

Reirin’s lips twisted into a pout. “But it bothers me! I hate to think that someone drove my most precious and adorable court lady into a corner, and I can’t even get back at her.”

“C’mon, w-would you please stop and think before you say something that embarrassing?!”

“Besides, if I leave the aphids to run amok over my gourds, the damage might spread to the rest of the garden. It wouldn’t do to sit back and watch.”

“Am I a gourd to you?!” Leelee retorted, the muscles of her face twitching.

“Oh dear,” said Reirin, her eyes going wide. “I chose my words wrong. You’re not a gourd—you’re a potato. My most beloved potato. Please don’t take offense.”

“You think that makes it any better...?” Leelee had reached the point of staring off into space.

Just then, there came a knock on the storehouse door, at which the pair exchanged surprised glances.

“Could that be Tousetsu?”

“No. Her knock sounds different.”

“My, she’s trained you very well in a short amount of time, hasn’t she?”

While Reirin idly pointed out Tousetsu’s influence, Leelee went to cautiously open the door. The one she found standing there was none other than Shin-u, the captain of the Eagle Eyes.

“I see you’re awake,” he said, barging into the storehouse like he owned the place. He held a jar of ointment in his hand—another get-well gift, perhaps. “This is a popular muscle relaxant used by the military officers. The Gen clan vouches for its efficacy, so don’t hesitate to use it.”

“...Thank you very much.”

After ushering Shin-u into the seat Leelee had just occupied, Reirin hesitantly reached out to take the ointment. She found it curious how often the captain had gone out of his way to see her over the past few days.

I’ve heard rumors that the captain is a cutthroat professional... Could it be that he’s caught on to the switch and keeps coming by to check on the situation?

Back at the beginning, she might have welcomed the chance to make her predicament known and put an end to the swap, but now that she realized doing so would spell disaster, she had to stop Shin-u from finding out the truth at all costs.

Sensing that Leelee had likewise gone rigid with tension beside her, Reirin braced herself for the conversation ahead.

“How are you feeling?”

“Thankfully, I’ve been healing up quite well. I’ve always been the amazingly, incredibly sturdy sort, after all! Yes, sir!” she answered, casually emphasizing the fact that she was *not* the ever-sickly Kou Reirin.

“I see,” said Shin-u with a nod. Then, he muttered, “I was worried.”

“What?”

“I had to doubt the sanity of any woman who would spend an entire night drawing a bow that even a grown man would struggle to wield.”

Did he mean he was worried I'd lost my mind?

Reirin watched Shin-u's every move in breathless suspense.

“But.”

“Yes?”

“Your form was beautiful. I forgot to mention it earlier, but your dance was incredible too.”

Reirin blinked a few times at the sudden compliment. “I'm...honored to hear that?”

Was this some sort of advanced negotiation technique? An attempt to win her over and then get to the bottom of the matter in one fell swoop?

“Strange,” he said, his shapely eyebrows scrunching into a frown as he brought a hand to his mouth. “Whenever I'm around you, I never quite know what to say. What is this feeling?”

“Hm? Er, I'm not sure. Some kind of mental disorder, perhaps?”

Reirin was unsure how to respond to this completely unprompted health consultation. Given her intimate knowledge of medicinal herbs, she briefly wondered if she ought to offer more in-depth advice. However, when she cast a glance Leelee's way and saw that the girl's face was frozen in an unspeakable expression, she dropped the idea.

She was better off not talking to the captain too much at the moment. There was no telling what she might give away.

An awkward silence settled over the storehouse, until at last Shin-u opened his mouth to speak again. “Shu Keigetsu.”

“Yes?”

“I've been wondering about you a lot as of late.”

Oh no! Did he get struck with a flash of insight?!

Reirin broke into a cold sweat as he cut right to the heart of the matter.

“R-really now? How fortunate I am to have the guardian of the Maiden Court trouble himself—”

“Can a person’s attitude really change so much overnight? Could someone who didn’t even know how to keep to a beat show off such playful moves in perfect time to a tune? Could a Maiden outside the Gen clan just pick up a bow one afternoon and know how to make it sing?”

Shin-u’s blue gaze shot straight through Reirin. For all the times they had been described as icy, his almond-shaped eyes now brimmed with an innocent passion, like those of a little boy staring down an unknown creature.

“And could she suddenly become so beautiful?”

The intensity of his gaze stunned Reirin into silence.

“Erm...”

How could she get out of this one? That was the only thought running through her head.

“Are you hiding something from me, Shu Keigetsu?”

Was her best move to tease the straightlaced captain for making comments that sounded indistinguishable from pickup lines? Reirin’s face twitched as she realized Shin-u was likely to brush that off with a completely straight face, claiming, “I was just saying what I thought.”

I-I need to say something that will convince him...

Unfortunately, telling him a made-up story would weigh heavily on her conscience, and she wasn’t confident in her ability to lie either way.

Well, “silence is golden,” as they say.

Shin-u was best described as “straightforward” or “genuine,” and that unaffected nature of his probably meant that he wasn’t the type to deal in underhanded tricks. It seemed smarter to stay quiet and ride out his head-on barrage of questions than to make a poor attempt at subterfuge.

“...”

When she did nothing but avert her gaze and keep her silence, Shin-u heaved a sigh.

“You’ve changed too much. I saw you going at it with Lady Kin Seika during the Ghost Festival. The two of you used to talk all the time and act like the best of friends, but it hasn’t looked like that at all as of late.”

You haven’t passed any of that on to me, Lady Keigetsu!

Lamenting her predicament on the inside, she scrambled to go along with what Shin-u was saying. “N-no, that’s not true at all! As a matter of fact, this fruit right here was a get-well gift from Lady Seika. Our friendship is still going strong. Yes, sir!”

“Wait, that wasn’t it at all,” Shin-u shamelessly corrected himself. “Lady Kin Seika used to talk about you behind your back all the time, and you would glare her down whenever you saw her. The two of you weren’t friends—you fought like cats and dogs. Slip of the tongue.”

“...”

She’d been duped.

The captain absolutely does deal in underhanded tricks!

Bullets of sweat poured down Reirin’s face. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Leelee had slumped over with her face buried in her hands.

Shin-u leaned in toward the paralyzed Maiden. “That reminds me: You used to like my looks. I could feel your eyes on me throughout every ritual. One time when our eyes met, you even gazed back at me with a seductive smile.”

“...”

As she watched him peer into her face at point-blank range, Reirin panicked.

Is this one a lie? Or the truth?

If this was the same sort of trick as earlier, she was better off standing her ground, but if it was the truth, she was better off putting on a flirtatious act.

“That’s right—your eyes were always so full of yearning. Yet now the two of us can get this close, and still your gaze doesn’t waver—”

“I-I just remembered something I have to do!”

She couldn't talk her way out of this one.

When she realized his fingertips were about to brush her hair, Reirin sprang to her feet. She made a break for the storehouse door with enough force to knock over the wooden box she'd been using as a chair, only for Shin-u to grab her by the arm and throw her off balance.

“Eek!”

She nearly slammed into the floor, but a hand wound itself around her waist and lifted her into the air. She was promptly flipped back around, and before she knew it, she had found herself trapped in Shin-u's arms.

“Um...”

Reirin immediately put a hand on his chest to push them apart, but no matter how hard she shoved, his steel-like body didn't budge. He only gazed fixedly upon her as though observing an insect he'd never seen before.



“That’s definitely Shu Keigetsu’s face. No... I guess your expression looks a little different?”

He’s too close!

The way he brought his face to hers was nonchalant, revealing not a hint of intention to threaten or seduce her. Something intrigued him, so he wanted to get a closer look—she felt nothing more than that pure, almost boyish level of interest.

But, of course, the arms holding her in place boasted the strength of a grown man. Her pulse quickened as she noted that, although he didn’t seem to be exerting all that much force, his grip was still viselike enough to keep her held firmly in place.

“Answer me, Shu Keigetsu: Who are you?”

His well-defined nose. His thin lips. Both were almost close enough to be touching her.

“Pardon me!”

Thunk!

A dull thud rang out, and Shin-u’s grip loosened. Reirin backed away slowly, a hand pressed to her tingling forehead after the headbutt she had just landed on Shin-u’s jaw.

She nearly came out with the flimsy excuse of, “Sorry, I saw a fly,” but then it dawned on her: The situation in and of itself could make for the best argument to keep Shin-u at arm’s length.

“I can’t imagine this is the appropriate distance for a Maiden and the head of the Eagle Eyes to keep, Captain. I must ask that you back off,” she asserted as firmly as she could, heart pounding in her ears.

Shin-u gazed curiously upon his own arms, as though it had only just occurred to him that he’d been holding her in his embrace. Still, if the step he took backward was any indication, he saw no issue with her claim.

“Apologies.”

A large stretch of distance opened between the two of them. Relief washed over Reirin.

“Think about it with a clear head, Captain. Women can change their image in any variety of ways: All it takes is a touch of makeup or a single outfit. Is it your duty as captain to conduct a senseless interrogation over such trivial changes? No, I believe you have much more important things to be worrying about.”

“Do I?” he asked with a candid expression and a tilt of his head.

Reirin flustered; she hadn’t seen that response coming. But as she desperately racked her brains for “more important things,” a certain matter abruptly flitted across her mind.

“Yes. I have something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Is it true that the Kin clan has no high-ranking court lady by the name of Gayou?”

If anyone could provide her some information on that ivory silk, it would be the captain of the Eagle Eyes.

Taken by surprise, Shin-u creased his brow into a dubious frown, but it didn’t take long for him to start stroking his chin in thought. “I think so. Though given how particular Lady Seika is about her retainers, the Kin clan does cycle through a lot of court ladies. I can’t say for sure unless I look into it.”

“In that case, was there a court lady who claimed to have her ornamental hairpin stolen by a Shu about three days ago?”

“Oh, is this the matter you were arguing about during the Ghost Festival? No, there wasn’t. But I do remember someone reporting a missing hairpin about a month ago.” Stealing a glance at Leelee, he added, “And she wasn’t even certain if it had been lost or stolen. I don’t believe there was cause to single out a member of the Shu clan as the perpetrator.”

“I see...”

“Perhaps the problem lies in how expensive their furnishings are, but the Kins have become sensitive to that sort of thing after all the cases of embezzlement

and theft they've had to deal with. A month before *that* incident, there was a huge fuss over a stolen ivory silk robe."

Reirin jerked her head up in surprise at the extra bit of information he had so casually volunteered. "Did you say ivory silk?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Oh, nothing... I was simply impressed that you manage to remember each and every one of those little reports."

She attempted to dodge the question with a smile, only for Shin-u to wrinkle his brow and avert his gaze.

"It's just my job."

Oh... He's a little bit like Tousetsu.

The head court lady of the Kou Palace would likewise lapse into a grumpy silence whenever someone complimented her. That had been one of many reasons why Reirin had taken her for the ill-humored sort, but she now realized that perhaps that reaction was something brought about by the blood of the awkward, inarticulate Gen clan.

A smile crept over Reirin's face, at which Shin-u twisted his own into a pout. "What?"

"Nothing. I was just appreciating how cute you are."

"Mgh?!"

Shin-u was openly flabbergasted.

Sensing that she had thrown the guard off his game, Reirin took that opportunity to bring the conversation to a swift close. "Well then! My apologies, but since I'm still not feeling up to snuff, I think I'm going to lie down for a little while. May I request that you take your leave?"

"Hey."

"I'll be sure to put this ointment to good use. Thank you very much."

"Hey," repeated Shin-u, digging in his heels surprisingly hard. "You still haven't answered my question."

Reirin smiled. “About what happened? About whether I’m hiding something? To have doubts about something means that the truth is not yet set in stone.”

“Wha—”

“And to fret over a truth that has yet to be determined is nothing but a waste of strength.”

After dismissing his questions in a stance so very typical of her, she lay down upon her bed of woven grass.

“I’m scraping the bottom of my own energy reserves at the moment, I’m afraid. I apologize for letting you see me in such a disgraceful state.”

She left the *so get the hell out of here* implied.

Shin-u cast a lingering glance at Reirin’s turned back, but at last he stood up and turned on his heel. “Fine. I’ll let it slide for today. This is no time to be twiddling my thumbs anyway.”

Despite Reirin’s relief that he had eased off on his interrogation, his ensuing comment struck her as curious. She lifted her head from her bed. “Has something happened?”

“Not exactly.”

Shin-u stopped as he was about to head through the doorway, his brow furrowing as he debated how to phrase his response. Narrowing his blue eyes a fraction, he gazed up at the boundless skies past the door.

“Something *might* happen. There’s something strange in the air around the inner court.”

“Strange how?”

Reirin got up from her bed and squinted out the doorway, but all she could see were clear, blue skies. There wasn’t a hint of “strangeness” to be found in the majestic sunlight pouring down from the heavens. It was a quiet summer afternoon, not a sound to be heard aside from the occasional rustling of the breeze. That was how it looked to her, at least, but Shin-u seemed to see things differently.

“There’s this tense...or maybe *peculiar* aura. It feels like one of those

precariouly sunny days, when too much yang builds up and a downpour comes out of nowhere,” Shin-u muttered, sharpening his senses as he looked up at the sky. Coupled with those mysterious blue eyes of his, he was the perfect picture of an eagle determined not to let its prey escape.

“Do you have the power to sense that sort of thing, Captain?” Reirin asked.

His lips curled into a smile. “Who knows?” Turning only his head to look at her, he shot back a meaningful glance. “What I *can* say is that an eagle never misses its prey. Don’t forget that.”

I’ll be sure to uncover the truth of who you really are, said those azure eyes of his.

Reirin watched him go, still sweating up a storm. When at last she was sure his footsteps had faded into the distance, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Noticing Leelee’s eyes on her, she returned it with a smile. “Well, we’ve avoided disaster for the time being...right?”

“Uh, no! I don’t think so!” came the redhead’s response, the corners of her lips twitching. “You have an astounding knack for seducing people, I see!”

“What?”

“Saying ‘to fret over a truth that has yet to be determined is blah blah’ is the same as saying ‘go find out for yourself, and once you know the truth for a fact, come pursue the matter with all you’ve got’! Why did you go out of your way to rile him up?!”

“What?!”

As Reirin boggled at this harsh assessment, Leelee looked back at her like she’d just seen a ghost. “If I remember right, the captain of the Eagle Eyes can be granted the lowest-ranking consort. Wait, seriously...? You’ve got to be kidding me. Must you go and complicate this already complicated situation even further?” the court lady mumbled to herself, massaging her temples.

“Could you please speak a little more plainly, Leelee...?” said Reirin, looking bemused.

Then, a dark cloud passed over her face as she turned her attention to the

concerning bit of information she'd just learned.

There is no court lady by the name of Kin Gayou. Nor was there a court lady who accused Leelee of stealing her hairpin. And someone's ivory silk robe was stolen...

What did it all mean?

It's reasonable to assume that someone posed as a Kin court lady to give the order to torment "Shu Keigetsu."

But to what end?

While it was true that the persecution or attempted assault of a Maiden was a wicked deed, under the circumstances, something as trivial as the harassment of "Shu Keigetsu" was unlikely to have been charged as a crime. There was no need to go out of the way to dress up as another clan to avoid accountability.

Does that mean the culprit is someone who's supposed to be on "Shu Keigetsu's" side?

Something smelled fishy.

Yet just as Reirin had gotten lost in her thoughts, a storm of footsteps and shouts came from outside the storehouse.

"Get out here, Leelee! How dare you move the walls of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion without a word of warning to the Noble Consort! She was furious to hear that the other clans have been sending people in and out of here all day!"

Judging by what they were saying, it was the Shu Palace court ladies. Leelee and Reirin exchanged weary looks. The inevitable commotion had finally made its way to their doorstep.

"Let me handle this," offered Reirin.

"What kind of court lady would sell out her mistress—who's in for a month-long recovery period, mind you! The whole thing happened while you were asleep, anyway, so you should stay put. No, correction: You should go lie down."

Leelee then made good on her word by bravely marching out the door. Reirin

was so enchanted by how dependable her attendant looked from behind that she opted to take her up on her kind offer.

Rather than lie down, however, she lit the single candle in the back of the storehouse. As she gazed into the flicker of the flame, she called out to Keigetsu in her mind.

Can you hear me, Lady Keigetsu?

Reirin couldn't use the Daoist arts. If she wanted to talk to someone straight away, she had no choice but to go pay them a visit herself. Unfortunately, both the state she was in and the current circumstances meant she didn't stand a chance of getting inside the Palace of the Golden Qilin.

What's more, she had the feeling that if she sat back and waited for their next meeting, something irrevocably terrible was going to unfold in the meantime.

Please use your flame magic. There's something I want to talk to you about.

Reirin had the sense that she was currently the target of a very complex web of hatred. And nothing so harmless as the antipathy or jealousy Keigetsu had demonstrated—this was a much more cold-blooded, calculating, and deep-seated malice.

Besides, she was concerned about how Keigetsu was faring too. If nothing else, it would prove difficult to conduct herself as usual around the Kou Palace now that Tousetsu knew who she was. It seemed to Reirin that this was as far as their unplanned, undiscussed body swap was going to go.

I'm sure you're feeling anxious too, Lady Keigetsu. I imagine you're dismayed to see the whole matter running away from you and blowing up into something much bigger.

Though Keigetsu was supposed to be a year her elder, Reirin saw her as something of a tantrum-throwing child. She was a spoiled attention-seeker—but deep down, not all that bad a person.

After all, Reirin knew the truth of the world: Colds ridden with raucous coughs and sneezes were never as big a deal as they seemed, and it was the ailments that came on quietly and slowly eroded the insides that proved the most unpleasant of all.

Outside, the argument between Leelee and the court ladies was still raging. Reirin made the conscious effort to tune it out as she gazed fixedly upon the fire.

Please call my name.

"Kou Reirin."

And lo, her wish was granted.

"Save...me."

Keigetsu's face appeared in the flame, her voice little more than a feeble whimper.

"Lady Keigetsu! This is incredible! My voice really got through to you! We must have a real connection."

"Why do you get so excited over every little thing?" the girl in the flame mumbled. Her hair was disheveled, and it was clear to see how haggard she was even in the dim light.

Concerned, Reirin frowned and lowered the volume of her voice. "Lady Keigetsu... Are you all right? Is your fever still running high? Did you drink all the medicine I made for you?"

"Yeah. I've been inhaling powders ten and twenty-one at regular intervals too. Number one hundred seven had the same smell as that decoction, so I took that with some hot water a little while ago. I'm...feeling a lot better."

"Wow! You figured that out all on your own using its scent as a clue? That's amazing, Lady Keigetsu! You must have a knack for medicinal remedies," Reirin exclaimed in admiration.

Then, Keigetsu's face contorted like she'd swallowed a mouthful of boiling water right then and there.

"Lady Keigetsu...?"

"But...it's all over." On the other side of the flame, Keigetsu clutched her head hard enough to tear out her own hair. *"Tousetsu knows. She's one terrifying woman. When she came to my room first thing yesterday morning, she told me, 'If you value your life, don't take a step from this room.'"*

From the sound of it, Tousetsu had chosen to lock Keigetsu inside her chambers. Reirin was tempted to sigh at how fast she'd renounced her duties as an attendant, but taking the woman's character into account, perhaps her reasoning had been that she'd want to kill Keigetsu the moment she saw her face. This was the greatest compromise she could make.

Since Keigetsu didn't understand that, however, her eyes were wide with fear as she went on, *"Nobody's come anywhere near my room since then. She claims she told them I voluntarily shut myself away for the purification rite, but I bet that's a lie. She's going around telling the truth to everyone as we speak! B-both Her Majesty and His Highness are going to call for my execution with dreadful looks on their faces..."*

Her hands were shaking, clenched with enough force to turn her knuckles white.

Reirin gave a tilt of her head in the face of Keigetsu's transparent panic. "Why not undo the switch before the matter comes to light?"

"As if things would end there!" she shouted back. *"They'll never forgive me for what I've done. The only reason they can't do anything worse to me now is because I'm in your body! The moment I return to my old wretched vessel, it'll be the end of the road for me. I'll be killed in the most gruesome way imaginable on the spot!"*

So overwhelming was her fear that she seemed to be confusing her imagination with reality.

Just how much did Tousetsu threaten her, exactly?

Reirin's eyes almost glazed over for a moment, but she quickly pulled herself back together. The bottom line was that Keigetsu's fear of execution was what kept her lingering in Reirin's body—and locked inside her room, for that matter.

"I'll talk Tousetsu down, so don't worry about that part. Lady Keigetsu... Hiding away in fear won't solve anything. We'll have to undo the switch eventually, and we must work to resolve the resulting problems one by one. Surely you realize by now that nothing good will come of staying in my body?"

"No... No way!"

Keigetsu shook her head back and forth like a child. The gesture was less one of stubbornness than one of intense dread and despair.

“I’m...finished. I don’t know what to do anymore. Everyone’s going to condemn me. I’m going to be tormented and killed. Everyone will turn their backs on me...”

“Please calm down! You mustn’t say such terrible things. If no one else, I am fully prepared to fix this problem alongside you. If you can’t trust me, then you can always rely on your guardian, Noble Consort Shu, for support. I’m sure you can find a helping hand somewhere.”

Keigetsu went stock-still.

“Hah... The Noble Consort, eh?” Lowering her gaze, she began to chuckle. *“Heh... Ha ha ha! It really is hysterical. I’ve been alone from the very start. I’ve always been...so wretched...dancing in the palm of someone else’s hand.”* Her mumblings gradually tapered off until she lapsed into complete silence.

“Lady Keigetsu, what—” Reirin started, leaning forward in concern.

“You wanted to know my wish?” When Keigetsu at last opened her mouth again, it was to interrupt her. *“My wish on the night of the Double Sevens Festival? It was exactly what I yelled in that moment.”*

“Begone, you accursed woman!” she had once screamed at Reirin.

But this was how Keigetsu had come to see it now: Perhaps those words had been directed at herself.

“I’ve always been so miserable. I’ve spent my whole life getting jerked around by others, cowering, people-pleasing. When I learned the Daoist arts, I thought I finally had a way to make other people listen to me—but even that felt empty. All it did was teach me that no one would spare me a second glance without those powers.”

She wanted people to look her way. She’d always screamed her lungs out in hopes that someone might notice her, comfort her, or watch her, but all it had ever done was make her look pathetic. No doubt her wish to take Kou Reirin’s place had come not from a place of hatred, but one of deep admiration.

Please give what you have to me, she was saying then. Please trade places with me. I don't need the loathsome body of a girl shunned by all.

"I...wanted to disappear."

Fat teardrops began to spill down her cheeks.

"I was ashamed. I was wretched. And so I wanted to turn myself into you—the butterfly beloved by all, but..." Her voice trembled. *"It didn't work. I was still miserable. I wonder why it is, Kou Reirin? I've come to hate myself even more than I did before the switch."*

Yes, *now* she was well and truly miserable. The ground was crumbling beneath her feet. Though she knew deep down that even Kou Reirin's body couldn't win her anyone's affection if the person inside didn't match up, she still clung pathetically to the vessel like she was holing up inside a fort.

She realized how shameful she was, but still she couldn't bring herself to act—and Keigetsu hated herself for that from the bottom of her heart. Tears streaming down her face, she eventually screwed both eyes shut.

"Say, Kou Reirin. You can go ahead and kill me."

She had no idea if it could make up for what she'd done, but she made the offer all the same.

A hush fell over both sides of the flame.

What finally broke the silence was Reirin's sigh as she put a hand to her cheek. "You certainly like to take things to extremes."

"What...?"

"What you really mean to say there is 'I'm sorry,' correct?"

Reirin returned Keigetsu's stunned silence with a rueful little smile.

"Just when it looked like you had not a shred of remorse, you shoot straight past an apology and ask for death. You're quite the mercurial sort, I see." A smile still playing on her lips, she gazed straight at Keigetsu through the fire. "And you're the vibrant sort too—almost like a flame. You're the perfect Maiden for the clan of fire."

“Wha—”

“I love how you wear your emotions on your sleeve. You scream, rage, cry, and despair to your heart’s content. That intensity of yours is such a pleasant sight to behold.”

Reirin meant every word of it. She liked how Keigetsu was true to her feelings to the point of simplicity. To someone like Reirin, who had relinquished her emotions out of sheer exhaustion, Keigetsu was the embodiment of a shining comet or a dancing flame. Both burned with an almost painful degree of passion, casting flickers of light as far as the eye could see.

“Wh-what...are you talking about? Do you get it? I’m the woman known as the sewer rat of the Maiden Court.” Keigetsu shook her head with eyes wide as saucers. Disbelief was written all over her face. *“Tousetsu said it too: I’m vulgar, emotional, and lazy. I hate to admit it, but she was right. No one could ever like a girl like that!”*

“But I just told you I do...” Reirin regarded Keigetsu’s inexplicable panic with a look of consternation. “I’ve been wondering about this, but why are you so critical of yourself, Lady Keigetsu? You have plenty of wonderful qualities.”

“I do not!” Keigetsu spat back.

“Are you certain?” Reirin looked back at her with total sincerity. “For a start, you can use the mystic arts, can’t you?”

“I mean...”

When Keigetsu hesitated to finish that sentence in the affirmative, Reirin began counting things off on her fingers. “You’re resourceful enough to pull off a scheme as ambitious as this body swap. It might be a simple consequence of poor foresight, but you have guts too. And an almost painful amount of passion.”

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“You also have backbone.” Reirin inclined herself toward the flame, emphasizing that this was the most important part. “I imagine my body has put you through a great deal of pain, Lady Keigetsu. Weren’t there moments of such immense anguish that you wanted to die? Yet you never gave in. You

stayed in that vessel and kept on fighting.”

Keigetsu drew her brow into a confused frown. That had all been to fulfill her wish to be pampered, and toward the end, she had largely coasted along because she didn’t have the energy to reverse the switch.

But Reirin only smiled back at her. “Your wish mattered more than whatever physical pain you had to endure. You desired something *that* intensely, and you refused to give it up no matter the cost. I consider an attitude like that to be a show of ‘backbone.’”

Keigetsu’s eyes flew wide open. After a few moments, she chewed on her lip, her eyes beginning to water. “*Don’t you get it? I...tried to have you killed.*”

“Hee hee... But you failed. In the end, all you managed to do was lend me a healthy body and bring me happiness.” Then Reirin narrowed her eyes mischievously and gave a defiant jerk of her chin. “Take that, Lady Keigetsu! You...erm...don’t have what it takes to make someone miserable!”

“What on earth are you doing?”

“My villainess impression. How is it? Are you vexed enough to be filled with vigor anew?”

“You’re terrible at this.”

Keigetsu’s voice was trembling, and her face was fixed into a tearful smile.

“Kou Reirin.”

Another tear slid down her cheek.

“I’m sorry.”

More and more words spilled forth with the apology.

“I...did wrong by you.”

“It’s all right. As far as I’m concerned, you took on nine days’ worth of my ailments for me. I’m truly sorry for all the trouble my body has caused you,” said Reirin sheepishly.

Keigetsu shook her head through her tears. *“It hasn’t.”*

“What?”

“Most likely...even the sickness I’ve suffered for the past nine days was my own fault.”

Reirin cocked her head to one side, wondering what she could mean by that.

Keigetsu wiped her tears with the back of her hand, then sat at attention. *“Hear me out. Someone orchestrated both this body swap and my illness—and that person was Noble Consort Shu.”*

“Huh...?”

The other Maiden automatically brought a hand to her mouth, struggling to process what she’d just heard.

Keigetsu seemed to be debating where to begin her explanation. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, until at last she carefully asked, *“Have you ever heard of a sort of magic called ‘venomcraft’?”*

“Hm? Yes, though all I really know is the name,” Reirin said with a vague nod. “It’s a poison formed by grouping insects and other bugs in the same jar so they devour each other, correct?”

Keigetsu struggled to keep her emotions from showing on her face. *“That’s right. But just leaving the bugs to kill each other won’t make it any more potent than a jinx. Only when the practitioner knows the Daoist arts and performs the right ritual and incantation will it gain power as a proper venomcraft. And...that very venomcraft is what’s caused me to suffer all this time.”*

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t your medicine that pulled me back from the brink but the Bow of Warding’s vibrations. In other words, that wasn’t a real ailment—it was a curse. And that curse was placed on me via the incense burner I received right after we swapped bodies. It was supposedly a gift from the Kin clan’s Lady Seika, but something tells me it didn’t actually come from the Kins. After all, the venomcraft spell took a ‘form’ that only I and one other person ought to know.”

Venomcraft was both a poison and a spell. Things like the shape, size, and smell of the shadow inevitably reflected the idiosyncrasies of the practitioner. Keigetsu had taught herself how to make a venomcraft by reading her father’s texts, so her version was unique to her as a caster. And the shadow that had

popped out of the incense burner bore those very same characteristics.

This reminds me of that ornamental hairpin, Reirin thought as she listened to her.

This was exactly like the case of that ivory silk's hairpin. Someone had dressed up as a Kin retainer and sought to bring down Shu Keigetsu—or Kou Reirin, as it were.

And now she knew who that “someone” was.

Her voice cracking, Reirin murmured, “Then that ‘one other person’ is...”

“Shu Gabi,” Keigetsu finished for her. *“The Noble Consort. She used the venomcraft spell she learned from me a long time ago.”*

Reirin frowned, bewildered. Keigetsu seemed convinced, but it was hard to so readily accept that the gentle, smiling consort could devise such a wicked scheme.

Noble Consort Shu? The same woman known for her kindness? She pretended to be an agent of the Kin clan and tried to curse me to death?

It couldn't be a coincidence that both sides of the swap had been attacked around the same time in the same manner. In that case, it stood to reason that both the hairpin debacle and the “pranks” had been instigated by the Noble Consort herself.

But...even if I can accept that she'd try to kill another clan's Maiden, why would she go after her own charge?

She had no idea what Noble Consort Shu could have been planning.

Still reeling, Reirin mentioned that someone had tried to hurt “Shu Keigetsu” through similar methods. Keigetsu fell silent.

“In that case,” she eventually said in a bitter, acrimonious voice, *“maybe she was trying to get rid of us both at the same time.”*

“No way...”

As Reirin was lost for words, Keigetsu went on with a touch of self-deprecation. *“In fact, she's the one who gave me the idea for the switch in the*

first place.”

Her lips twisting into a grimace, she confessed that the Noble Consort would sometimes—casually enough to sound like a joke, but always during Keigetsu’s most vulnerable moments—“advise” her to switch places with Reirin.

“Advise” her...?

Reirin thought back to the Noble Consort’s behavior during the Ghost Festival. Then, too, she had attempted to control Reirin’s actions under the guise of a “scolding.” A hint of her personality came through in the way she made her orders sound like they were for the recipient’s own good.

“The Noble Consort never does anything. She just watches. Obviously, the choice to carry out the switch was all on me. Still, I...I know this sounds like an excuse, but—”

When Keigetsu started to stumble over her words, Reirin jumped in with an emphatic assurance. “I see what you’re saying. The Noble Consort is very skilled at encouraging people to do things ‘of their own free will.’”

In hindsight, there were *a lot* of things that didn’t add up.

Despite her benevolent reputation, the Noble Consort had abandoned Shu Keigetsu to the Lion’s Judgment without a second thought. Rather than look out for the acquitted Maiden as her guardian and mother figure, she had chosen to exile her. Even with all the rumors that the girl wasn’t acting like herself, she hadn’t sent a single court lady over to confirm the facts of the situation. Just when it seemed like she had taken the laissez-faire approach of washing her hands of the scourge altogether, she had loudly reprimanded her charge for her lack of manners. Her behavior had been all over the place.

But if she knew the truth about the switch from the start, it all makes sense.

The likeliest explanation was that she had been out to kill Kou Reirin-turned-Shu Keigetsu. That was the reason she hadn’t defended her during the Lion’s Judgment. After Reirin survived the trial, she had chased her off to an environment both mentally and physically grueling, and she hadn’t demonstrated the slightest bit of interest upon hearing that her protégé seemed different. She wanted to keep Kou Reirin and Kin Seika from getting in

close contact, so she had insisted over and over again that the Maiden needn't attend the Ghost Festival, and the moment the two got into a conversation, she had interrupted them with her screaming. Or perhaps *that* had been a trick to distinguish her voice from her ivory silk disguise and keep Leelee from catching on to who she was.

"Once the two of us had traded places, I bet she was counting on us both to die in no time flat. You'd be executed in the Lion's Judgment. I'd die to your weak constitution and the venomcraft...or at least that was the plan."

"But why would she do that? I'm another clan's Maiden, so I can accept that part. But why would she target—" Reirin started to ask, thrusting herself forward, only for Keigetsu to cut her off.

"To keep me from talking. It was a two-for-one deal," she spat. *"All Noble Consort Shu wanted was to kill you in the Lion's Judgment. She didn't care if I died in the process—and that's all there was to it."*

In what was likely an involuntary impulse, Keigetsu clenched the hands she'd brought to her chest hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

"I could use magic, and it was no loss to her if I died... That's the whole reason she chose me as her Maiden," she went on, her voice oozing with anger and despair alike.

Still stunned, Reirin murmured, "But...why me? Why would Noble Consort Shu go so far to kill *me*?"

"Because you're too capable."

"What?" Reirin asked.

Keigetsu exhaled a short breath to steel herself. *"If I had to guess, the Noble Consort's ultimate goal is—"*

Bang bang bang!

Just then, there was a violent pounding on the storehouse door.

Reirin whipped around with a start. "I-I'm sorry, Leelee! Is your discussion with the court ladies giving you trouble? My apologies, but give me just a little —"

“That’s not it! We have a problem!” Leelee cut Reirin off, a panicked look on her face as she poked her head in through the doorway. Her next shout left Reirin wide-eyed with shock. “His Majesty the Prince is here! Please hurry and make yourself presentable!”

“What?”

They had a very unexpected—and under the current circumstances, *unwanted*—visitor on their hands.

When Reirin turned back toward the flame, Keigetsu was staring back at her, face frozen in fear. *“Wh-what if he found out about the switch...?”*

Reirin had been tempted to shout, “What do we do?!” herself, but seeing the other girl’s face awash with despair made her realize that this was no time to be turning to someone else.

Instead of falling apart, she hid her panic and gave Keigetsu as reassuring a nod as possible. “It’s all right. I’m sure he hasn’t caught on yet. Knowing him, he wouldn’t be coming to see me if he’d found out the truth; he’d jump straight to torturing you.”

“Is that a threat?!”

Unfortunately, all she’d managed to do was scare her even more.

Noting how Keigetsu had started to tremble, Reirin flustered and hurried to whisper, “A-anyway, I can handle this! Don’t worry, all I have to do is pretend that I’m you. Inept though I may be, I’ll play the villainess with all I’ve got!”

“Not only is that rude, but you’re making me even more nervous!”

“In any case, I’m going to blow out the candle for now! I’ll be sure to call you again later, so have your flame magic ready to go!”

At the exact same moment she ended their conversation in hushed tones and blew out the flame, the door to the storehouse flew open.

“I see you’re awake, Shu Keigetsu.”

Rays of sunlight pierced the shed like arrows, and with them came the stark silhouette of a tall man. As she strained her eyes to make out the dashing figure of Gyoumei, Reirin breathed a sigh of relief that he had called her by Keigetsu’s

name.

“Y-yes. So I am.”

Not a second after she nodded, it occurred to her that, no, perhaps she should have insisted she was asleep and asked him to hold off on his visit.

“Um, but, you see... I’m not asleep, per se, but I *am* laid up. Though it pains me to ask this, is there any chance you could come back another time? I’m afraid I don’t have anything on hand to give you a proper welcome.”

“I left my offering outside. This is an unofficial visit, so there’s no need to pull out all the stops.”

“But, er... That’s it! I’m bleeding all over the place, and it would pain me to have anyone over to such an inauspicious abode!”

“Oho? So you’d allow Shin-u, Kin Seika, and the Kou court ladies inside, but not me?”

Reirin choked on her response, at which Gyoumei arched an eyebrow.

“Shin-u is the one who informed me you were up,” he went on. “He was making rather frequent trips here, from the sound of it.”

Evidently, the prince had come to check on her in light of the report he’d received from the Eagle Eyes’ captain. Seeing as Tousetsu’s incessant visits to the storehouse had attracted Shin-u, and then it was *his* report that had brought Gyoumei to their door, the guests were summoning more guests in their wake.

When at last Gyoumei stepped inside the storehouse with the swaggering gait of a ruler, Reirin squeaked out, “But...but I look like such a mess!”

“Hmph. Like I care. By that argument, this shed is a sorry enough sight on its own. What kind of Maiden sleeps upon a bed of grass?”

“Hrk... You’ve got that—”

Reirin caught herself just as she was about to nod along in agreement. She had to be nastier than this.

“—wrong.”

“Excuse me? Do you have an argument for me, then?”

“Th-that I do. After all the work Leelee and I put into this storehouse, I won’t sit here and listen to you insult it, perhaps, please!”

If Gyoumei wasn’t willing to leave, she figured she had to at least *try* to act like Keigetsu. However, seeing as she had never talked back to the prince before, the words didn’t quite flow off her tongue.

Stumbling over her words, she went on, “These grass beds were made with particular care, each zone designed with a different weave and firmness to allow it to conform to the contours of the body!” By the end of her rambling, it dawned on her that she wasn’t telling him off so much as bragging to him about her homespun mattress.

What would a villainess do here?!

She rushed to recall the way Keigetsu had acted around Gyoumei in the past, but nothing of note came to mind. It drove home how little attention she had paid to everyone else around her up until now.

Paying no heed to Reirin’s quiet bout of panic, Gyoumei dipped back outside. He set his sights on Leelee, pointed to something sitting next to the door, and told her to bring it inside.

While he was at it, he ordered the Shu court ladies who had flocked to the storehouse to leave. “This is a conversation between the crown prince and his Maiden. Everyone but her personal attendant is dismissed. Granted, it seems this doesn’t even count as Shu territory anymore, so privacy might be the least of our concerns here.”

“Yes, Your Highness...”

The court ladies weren’t about to lay their anger bare before the prince they so adored, so they schooled their expressions into something more graceful and obeyed his command. The girls were sure to shoot a glare Reirin’s way the moment Gyoumei had turned his back again, but the Maiden in question wanted nothing more than to reach out a hand and follow after the group.

Wait! Please take me with yooou!

Alas, the trio of Gyoumei, Reirin, and Leelee was left behind in the storehouse.

A silence fell over the room, Gyoumei glancing around the shed like he was struggling to find a good conversation starter. Eventually, he frowned and remarked, “What a dank living space.”

“I-It’s not! I think it’s wonderful.”

“It’s dark and filthy.”

“With all due respect, Your Highness, we take care to fumigate the room with grasses and the like.”

“You have but a single attendant.”

“One perfect court lady is all I need.”

She ran with the plan of refuting everything he said—though she really *had* meant the last part—but she wasn’t certain how well her approach was working.

As Reirin struggled to pin down where the conversation was headed, her heart thumping in her chest, Gyoumei muttered something she hadn’t been expecting to hear: “How are you meant to recover like this?”

“Huh?” She stared at him blankly.

Disgruntled, Gyoumei repeated himself. “I’m saying that a wound that might otherwise heal is bound to fester in a place like this.”

Then, he signaled Leelee with his gaze. When Reirin glanced over, she found that her attendant was suddenly holding a large tub of water.

As he watched Leelee heft the heavy-looking container with a grunt, Gyoumei explained, “This water was drawn from the Violet Dragon’s Spring found in the innermost depths of the main palace and blessed thereafter. Use it to cleanse your wounds. Shin-u told me that you drew the Bow of Warding enough times to tear the skin of your palms.”

“What...?”

In other words, this was a get-well call. Reirin found the nature of Gyoumei’s

visit surprising enough on its own, but his explanation about the Violet Dragon's Spring came as even more of a shock.

The Violet Dragon's Spring was a small pool of water tucked behind woods and waterfalls. Legend had it that its water was as clear as a mirror and reflected the truth, and that using it to cleanse the skin could heal any wound in an instant. For that same reason, the spring was kept under tight control, and even the crown prince was only permitted to draw its water a few times a year. Reirin never would have dreamed that he would spend such a finite resource not on the sickly "Kou Reirin" but on "Shu Keigetsu" whom he had been so eager to lambaste as a villainess.

Well... In the end, I suppose it is just water...

For the record, Reirin wasn't the type to put much stock in curses and the like. Rather than appreciate the spring's grand reputation, she had always held a more pragmatic view of it as nothing more than very clear, clean water.

When she stared back at Gyomei in surprise, he awkwardly averted his gaze. "Don't get the wrong idea. I meant to bring this to Reirin, but it seems she's locked herself in her room for fear of spreading her sickness. I only brought it to you because I thought it would be a waste to discard it."

"Uh-huh..."

"That said, I *did* take the trouble of drawing it myself. What, you don't want it?"

"Um, no, that's not...!" Reirin flapped her hands on instinct, then immediately regretted her slip of the tongue.

Ack! I should have said, "No thanks, bleeeh!"

Though Reirin lamented missing a perfect opportunity to play the bad girl, she failed to realize that treating the precious miracle water fetched by the prince himself like some bizarre souvenir was questionable enough behavior as it stood.

Gyomei scowled at the unexpected reaction. "Hey."

Maidens were the girls who had been gathered to compete for the prince's favor. Under normal circumstances, something as simple as a one-on-one visit from the man himself ought to have had any one of them flushing with delight.

That wasn't even to mention that this was *Keigetsu*. She had always held a look of meek submission in her eyes, and her gaze loved to longingly trail after Gyoumei. Any time their eyes did happen to meet, her entire face would light up with triumph—so why was she brushing him off now?

I shouldn't have brought it, after all, he thought.

At the very least, there had been no need to bless it along with Reirin's share. In fact, he had been tempted to toss the water into the gardens not too long ago. But when he'd heard about Shin-u and company's successive trips to the storehouse, he had picked up the tub on sheer impulse.

"It's not like that... No, maybe it is..."

The moment he saw her hold up a hand before her face, however, Gyoumei swallowed his next words. The white cloth she had clearly wound around it only recently was already stained with blood. Upon closer inspection, the arm peeking through her sorry excuse for a sleeve—she'd torn it off while she was drawing her bow, apparently—was red, swollen, and trembling ever so slightly.

Gyoumei blanched. Her condition was even more pitiful than he'd heard.

He stalked toward her with a stormy look on his face.

"Um...?"

"Show me your hand," he said, making a forceful grab for her arm.

"Oh..."

Easily sidestepping her small show of resistance, he unraveled the cloth. The sight he unveiled was enough to knock him speechless. All the skin on her palm had peeled back, showing glimpses of the red flesh underneath.

"What is this?!"

"Um...an abrasion? I believe that would be the proper classification."

"It clearly goes beyond that!" Gyoumei struck down her carefree retort, his

face flushed with upset. “Do you mean to tell me this doesn’t hurt?”

“Er, no, it *does*...” the girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face sheepishly responded. Then, for reasons that escaped the prince, her lips curled into a smile and she gazed lovingly upon the palm of her hand. “You’re right. It hurts quite a bit.”

“Why are you *smiling*?”

Usually, this was the part where she’d cry or moan. Lost as to what she could be thinking, Gyoumei furrowed his brow. He’d never seen anything like this before.

“You’ve been acting strange as of late.”

“Y-you think so?! No, you must be imagining things!”

Disregarding her sudden fluster, Gyoumei pulled the tub closer and submerged the clean parts of cloth he’d snatched from her. Once the material was soaked through, he took it and gently wound it around her bloodied hand.

When the girl shot him a surprised glance, he stared back at her in turn. “I heard that Reirin’s fever began to recede around when she heard the bow’s vibrations. So...”

“Yes?”

“So...I’m grateful to you for that,” he declared, forcing the words from his throat. “And I’m ashamed of myself. Your past conduct notwithstanding, I questioned your good intentions and maligned you. My behavior was unjust... and I apologize for it.”

The clear-cut apology was so *him* that it earned a quiet quirk of the Maiden’s lips.

“It’s fine.”

Her smile looked so very serene and beautiful that it captivated even one as accustomed to gorgeous women as Gyoumei.

“I did it because I wanted to. There’s no need for you to thank me or apologize over it, Your Highness.”

Her bearing as steadfast as the earth itself drew a gulp from the prince.

Gyoumei stared long and hard at the Maiden before him, forgetting how to breathe for a moment.

Was she...always this sort of woman?

She wore a faint smile on her face, accepting even her still-oozing wounds with grace. Her once-servile eyes now bore the sparkle of sunlight, and the lips she had so loved to twist into a haughty smirk now curved into a loose and natural smile.

“You...”

“Yes?”

When she looked up, a strand of hair spilled from behind her ear. It was the same hair she had insisted was “trimmed” even after suffering an attack from her court lady. Whatever she had done to treat those tresses, there was no longer a trace of damage about them—only a lustrous shine.

Before he knew it, he was reaching out for the loose lock of hair like his fingers were drawn to it.

“You’ve changed a—”

“Ahh! Watch out, milady! The precious holy water is going to drip from your bandages onto His Highness’s clothes!”

Just as his fingers were about to brush Reirin’s hair, Leelee’s panicked voice rang out across the room. Gyoumei pulled back with a start.

Oh no! I need to say a villainess line! Reirin simultaneously thought, snapping back to her senses after the prince’s confounding behavior had made her freeze up.

When she stole a glance at Leelee, the redhead’s eyes were screaming, *Do not let him find out about the switch!*

Pulling herself together, Reirin lifted her chin. “Not! That noble-sounding sentiment was actually a lie. To tell you the truth, I think a certain someone ought to be a little grateful to me.”

“Excuse me?”

Reirin gave a vigorous mental nod upon noting how fast Gyoumei’s mood had soured. It seemed that insulting or belittling “Kou Reirin” was indeed the number one way to get on his bad side—though it was a little embarrassing to consider just how much that meant he cared for her.

“And if I may have a word, you coddle her far too much! As the master of the Maiden Court, shouldn’t you keep an appropriate distance from her in the spirit of fairness? At the very least, I’m sure she would be heartbroken to know that you treat the other Maidens so coldly and save your kind smile only for her.”

While she was at it, she admonished Gyoumei for his excessive affections. Though she’d managed to live in ignorance of his stifling love until now, if she let it run its course, she was going to have a hard time once she returned to being Reirin.

Her complaint made Gyoumei’s face twist in displeasure. “This *is* my way of being fair. Wouldn’t it be the height of injustice to smile equally upon a butterfly and a sewer rat?”

“I’d appreciate it if you dropped the nickname. Besides, aren’t rats too cute to be used as an insult? And by that token, isn’t there a very fine line between a butterfly and a moth?”

“You dare call Reirin a *moth*?”

Just as he’d been warming up to her, the mood took a turn for the tense. But that was for the best.

Just one more push! Reirin thought as she leaned forward, but she didn’t get to say her next words. Their conversation was interrupted when someone darted through the open doorway.

“Pardon me, Your Highness. I come bearing urgent news.”

Lo, it was Shin-u. In sharp contrast to earlier, he had a grim look upon his face.

“There’s been a problem at the Palace of the Golden Qilin,” he went on.

“What is it? Did something happen to Reirin?”

“Ah!” Reirin braced herself at the mention of the Kou Palace, afraid that

something might have happened to Keigetsu.

Yet after sparing the pair a hesitant glance, Shin-u lifted his face like he'd found his resolve and said the last thing Reirin had been expecting to hear: "No. Her Majesty has fallen ill."

It took her a moment to process the meaning of the words he'd said.

"Huh...?"

"What did you say?"

"It would appear she's suffering from the same symptoms as Lady Kou Reirin. From what I hear, she fell abruptly ill after yesterday's tea party, and now she is too feverish to even take a sip of water. Her Majesty insisted that she would be fine, so only a limited number of people were kept aware of the situation. Earlier today, however, she slipped fully out of consciousness. Her court ladies reported to us thereafter, determining that they could no longer afford to keep it a secret."

Gyoumei turned pale upon hearing the explanation. "Is it an epidemic?"

If it were indeed such an emergency, he would need to assume immediate command of the situation as the master of the Maiden Court.

But Reirin murmured, "No...it's a curse."

Her ominous mutterings caused all three of the others present to turn and look at her, but she was too absorbed in her thoughts to notice.

Lady Keigetsu's malady was no ordinary sickness but a curse wrought by venomcraft. The very same curse she taught to the Noble Consort once upon a time. I thought I had exorcised it with the Bow of Warding...but what if it only detached itself from Lady Keigetsu's body? If that's truly the case, and that venomcraft curse has now befallen Aunt Kenshoo...

All of a sudden, the image of a venomous creature slipping out of an incense burner and scuttling into the distance crossed her mind. What if the destination of that life-eroding venomcraft had been Kenshoo's chambers in the innermost depths of the Kou Palace?

"If I had to guess, the Noble Consort's ultimate goal is—"

She recalled Keigetsu's half-finished sentence. Perhaps the girl would have gone on to say the following: "the assassination of the empress."

Lady Keigetsu said I was capable...

Reirin turned over thoughts in her head, bringing a hand to her mouth on instinct.

"Capable" was a word more often used to appraise one's problem-solving abilities than their skill in the performing arts. And if there was one issue the chronically ill Reirin had contributed to solving around the Kou Palace, it was improving sanitary conditions.

She was the one who had turned most of the palace gardens into a plot of medicinal herbs, gathered up pests to give as food to her rats, and pulled Kenshoo into several of her training sessions. There was even a chance that she had unwittingly exorcised another curse with the song of her bowstring during her nightly practice. Without her realizing it, Reirin had become a bulwark protecting the empress.

I'm sure she was worried that the venomcraft wouldn't activate with me around—or that even if it did, its effects would be negligible. That's why Noble Consort Shu wanted to have me removed from the picture.

Once Reirin was put into Shu Keigetsu's body, an execution would take care of the rest. Kou Reirin's body could be filled with Keigetsu, who wouldn't have the know-how to resist her fate—or so went the script that the Noble Consort had written.

Noble Consort Shu was willing to go that far to take Aunt Kenshoo's life!

The sheer force of her spite sent a shiver down Reirin's spine.

Kenshoo was a skilled martial artist and could easily drive back any middling assassin. If her opponent was a curse, on the other hand—and one dreadful enough to gnaw away at a person's very life force—that changed things. She couldn't repel it through the orthodox means of her sword or her fists.

I need to hurry up and think of a way to fight off the curse...

Reirin's heart felt like it might burn to ash in the fires of her impatience.

“Hey, Shu Keigetsu. Why do you say it’s a curse?” asked Gyoumei, a dubious frown on his face.

Reirin’s head snapped back up. “Infectious diseases spread via the air or bodily fluids. It’s hard to imagine that the far-removed empress would come down with the illness before any of the court ladies who attended the victim’s room.” An air of panic about her, she clung to Gyoumei’s sleeve. “Furthermore, weren’t the Bow of Warding’s vibrations more effective in curing the Kou Maiden’s symptoms than the medicine she took? That alone should be proof that this is no ordinary sickness but a curse. I beseech you, please lend me the Bow of Warding once more!”

“You can’t be serious. You intend to draw it again?!”

“Of course. I’m going to exorcise the malady.”

For Reirin, Kenshuu was both an aunt and her beloved mother figure within the Maiden Court. She adored that paragon of a Kou woman—always calm and composed, laughing that deep and easy chuckle, and doting upon the children with a tender look in her eyes—and she didn’t want to imagine ever losing her.

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to her. For heaven’s sake, please let me have that bow!”

“No.” Gyoumei’s tone left no room for argument. “Go rest.”

His gaze slid over the pitiful sight of her palm bandaged in cloth, but Reirin was too worked up to notice.

“Why?!” she yelled in a rare display of emotion. “Do you not believe in curses?! To be perfectly honest, I used to be skeptical of things like curses and superstition myself, but not anymore. There *are* curses in this world, and miracles *can* happen. Please afford me the power to create a miracle!”

Perhaps in the past, Reirin would have backed down as soon as Gyoumei told her no. It would have pained her to know that a loved one was suffering from a curse, but she wouldn’t have lost her composure.

But things were different now. The idea of losing the person she loved as a mother terrified her, and she was desperate to do whatever she could to save her life. She believed in curses, and she prayed for miracles. Her emotions could

be shaken—almost like a flame.

She believed that *this* was what it meant to be alive.

“Please.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I won’t give you the Bow of Warding.”

“Why?! Do you still doubt me? What must I do to earn your trust?!”

Pressed for an answer, Gyomei opened his mouth to give her one. And yet...

Am I to say that I don’t doubt her at all?

He stopped himself just before the words could become sound.

*That I believe her good intentions? That I’m only worried about her wounds?
But that...*

It would be almost like he’d opened his heart to her.

He clenched his hands into fists without even realizing it.

Reirin was the only one he had ever allowed into his heart. He couldn’t believe that he had shunt his beloved aside to go see this woman and, in the end, almost confessed his affections to her. Didn’t that constitute a true betrayal of Reirin?

“Never will come a day when I trust you,” Gyomei thus asserted, his voice tart.

He averted his gaze when a flicker of heartbreak crossed the girl’s eyes.

“After the countless times you’ve pandered to others with sugarcoated words, how do you expect a single act of sincerity to give me total faith in you?”

But still, he thought. There was no doubt that the woman standing before him had begun to change. It was like a caterpillar was about to emerge from its chrysalis as a big, bright butterfly. If he saw that transformation through, he wondered if he might absolve her of her villainous reputation and even someday come to smile upon her.

“Know your place. You aren’t worthy of wielding a sacred weapon as you are

now. But I'll be sure to remember that you offered to exorcise my mother's malady. Perhaps in time—"

"Then I'm done here." She cut off his attempt at appeasement in a low voice.

When he looked over at her again, she was staring straight back at him. The piercing intensity of her gaze stole the breath from his lips.

"The Lion's Judgment, the Ghost Festival, and now this. That's three times I have asked you to hear me out and trust me. And all three times you have denied me. In that case, I'm done here." Her tone was matter-of-fact, but there was an ineffable threat to the words. She lifted her chin, then declared with a tone of finality, "I will no longer ask for your permission nor consult you on my decisions. I will do as I please. Punish me however you see fit."

With that, she made to leave the storehouse with nothing but the clothes she was wearing—the water-soaked cloth on her hand included.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"I just said that I won't tell you."

She sidestepped the hand Gyoumei reached for her. Miffed, he attempted to block her path. But when he realized he was about to kick over the tub of water, he shot a glance at where it sat near his feet. And then...

"Huh?!"

His eyes went wide at what he saw reflected on the water's surface for a fleeting moment.

"Wait! Where are you going, milady?!" the court lady shouted, hurrying after her mistress.

"Is it all right to just let Shu Keigetsu go, Your Highness?" Shin-u asked quietly, but Gyoumei remained frozen in place.

Perhaps frustrated to watch him stand there paralyzed and tongue-tied, Shin-u briskly went on, "For the time being, I'll keep the Bow of Warding under strict supervision in the Eagle Eyes' office to ensure that she can't steal it in a blind rampage. Of course, there's still every possibility that Her Majesty's symptoms stem from an illness. As our crown prince, I ask that you give each station their

orders posthaste.”

“Right.”

Shin-u waited for the prince to spare him a small nod, then took off. Gyoumei remained rooted to the spot, not even bothering to watch him go.

I need to act now.

Gyoumei had to notify every other palace and lock down the Palace of the Golden Qilin. He had to call upon a number of physicians and pick out a team to determine the underlying cause of her symptoms. He had to crack down on rumors so as to prevent unrest from spreading among his subjects. The list of tasks to be taken care of flooded his head in waves. So too was he deeply unsettled to think that his dauntless mother was laid up with fever. Never once had he doubted that Kou Kenshuu, the leader of the Maiden Court and the mother of the nation, was as unshakable as the earth itself; yet now she couldn't even drag herself out of bed.

A sense of restlessness shot through him, urging him to act on his first impulses.

On the other hand, the sight he had just witnessed and the epiphany it gave him churned painfully in his core, sewing his legs to the spot.

Just now...

It happened the moment Shu Keigetsu had breezed past the tub.

The one to cross the surface of the water from the Violet Dragon's Spring—that which was said to reflect the truth—had been Reirin.

Was I seeing things?

No—the sunlight shining through the doorway had ensured that the image on the water's surface was clear and defined. And there was no way that Gyoumei would attribute the delicate beauty he had cherished day in and day out to someone else, not even for a second.

But that meant...

“I beseech you; hear me out, if only a little.”

What she'd said to him during the Lion's Judgment replayed in the back of his mind. She hadn't begged for her life in the face of execution but instead stood with her head held high as she made her case.

"If you are truly the one praised as our benevolent ruler, my kindhearted cousin—"

She had so naturally called him by a title only Reirin ever used.

She hadn't flinched before a beast but instead looked ahead with dignity. Even after she was attacked by her court lady, she had stayed calm and never let slip a single unkind word. Yes, she even had the same habit of tilting her head to the side and putting a hand to her cheek.

Her dance had been as light as a butterfly's. She had the backbone to keep drawing a bow heedless of how it tore her skin. Above all else, she had that penetrating look in her eyes, not a trace of cajolery or cowardice to be found.

When did it start...?

His heart skipped a beat. The hand he had instinctively clamped over his mouth was trembling.

"There are curses in this world, and miracles can happen."

When did they switch places?!

They had switched places. That was the only answer that made sense. After all, ever since the night of the Double Sevens Festival, the girl with Kou Reirin's face had suddenly begun to nestle up to him, weep exaggerated tears, and loudly bemoan the pain she was in.

And if Reirin's soul had been trapped inside Shu Keigetsu's body...

What did I say to her?!

Gyoumei felt the blood drain from his body.

What had he done to her?

He'd thrown her in the dungeons, put her in a cage with a beast, and berated her as a villainess. He had declined to offer her a hand when she was in trouble, and he had dismissed the attack by her court lady the moment she claimed it

wasn't an issue. He hadn't provided her a decent reward for her magnificent dance, and even after she pushed herself to the point of injury and collapse, he had once again insisted that he couldn't trust her.

Above all else, he hadn't seen through to who she really was.

"That's three times I have asked you to hear me out and trust me."

He recalled her bizarre habit of opening and closing her mouth. Perhaps that was a sign that she had been the victim of some sort of silencing spell. Part of him wondered if such magic could really exist, but if it was already possible to switch bodies, he couldn't rule it out.

"All three times you have denied me. In that case, I'm done here."

The chill in her voice pierced his heart like a blade of ice.

I...

She was his beloved—the sweet, pure girl who had been the first to teach him how to long for another. It was precisely because she would never even think to pass judgment on someone else that he had wished to stamp out all threats and protect her, even if it meant casting aside the creed of fairness he had imposed upon himself.

Yet *she* was the one he had hurt the most as a result.

"..."

Feeling like his very heart had been crushed in his chest, Gyoumei turned toward the door with an ashen face.

"Wait..."

For once, the lips of the crown prince known for his vivacious and regal demeanor trembled.

He broke into a run.

"Wait... Reirin!" he howled, sprinting out the door with enough force to send the tub flying.

But his beloved butterfly was nowhere to be found. All that lay before him was a neatly landscaped garden that looked like a picture of paradise.

It was past noon, and the sinking sun shone upon the grass and trees with enough force to roast them. It was as if to say that the long day was far from over.

Chapter 5:

Reirin Gets Inside

MEANWHILE, at the Palace of the Golden Qilin...

The gate that had always been thrown wide open was now firmly shut. Toward the top of the doors were a sakaki leaf and a length of paper with the word “sealed” written on it in red ink. That meant the gate was not to be opened due to the presence of an impurity or sickness within the palace.

Out of breath from running, Reirin pursed her lips as she stared up at the red calligraphy. She had to do something before that became the word “mourning.”

“Wai... Wait up...!” Just as Reirin took a step forward, the broken fragments of a voice reached her from behind.

It was Leelee, her shoulders heaving as she wheezed. “Why are you...so fast?! Shu Keigetsu was even...a sluggish walker!”

“There’s a trick to how to swing your arms and set your feet on the ground,” said Reirin, pulling back her disheveled hair as she glanced at her attendant. “You came at just the right time, Leelee. I’m sorry to ask this, but would you mind bending down right around here?”

“Why, yes, I *would* mind! Anyone can see that you’re up to no good!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it that. I just want to jump the wall a little.”

“That’s exactly what I’d call ‘no good,’ damn it!” said Leelee, her speech slipping in the heat of the moment. “You do realize that’s trespassing, right?!”

Reirin gave a gentle shake of her head. “It’s not. After all, this used to be...” But the moment she tried to finish her sentence with *my home*, the words vanished into gasps. Frowning, she muttered, “I have to meet with her as soon as possible.”

“Who? Shu Keigetsu? What...are you going to do once you see her?” Leelee asked with a gulp.

“Say, Leelee.” Reirin turned around, a smile on her face. “Even if I stop being the person I am now, can I still come see you?”

“No!” Leelee shouted on reflex. “I want you...to stay my mistress. I...don’t want you to go back!”

Her hands flew to her mouth upon realizing she’d let her emotions get the best of her. She was about to cover it up with one of her usual cheeky digs—but, thinking better of it, she instead stared straight back at the Maiden before her.

“You’re...my very first mistress.” Her large, catlike eyes were the slightest bit damp with tears. “This is a first for me. It’s the first time that I’ve thought that someone was incredible, or that I could never measure up. The first time I’ve felt compelled to look out for someone... The first time I’ve met someone who I genuinely want to serve of my own free will.”

“Oh, Leelee...”

“I’m ‘Shu Keigetsu’s’ only court lady, right? We can live a fun life together in that storehouse, can’t we? But if you go back to being ‘Kou Reirin,’ you’ll have plenty of court ladies at the Palace of the Golden Qilin just as good as me. No... even before that, I could end up killed if that woman brings the whole Shu clan down with her.”

Brow scrunching as she frowned, the girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face—Reirin—declared, “That won’t happen. Not a chance.”

Leelee’s face shot up at the strength of her assertion. Reirin met that look with a faint and placating smile.

“You’d do best not to underestimate me. The love of a Kou is nothing if not stifling, I’ll have you know.”

“Huh?”

Unable to tell where this was going, Leelee wore her confusion plain on her face.

Reirin kneeled down before her. “Just think about Tousetsu and His Highness. Both of them have the blood of the Kou clan in their veins, and the sheer force

of their affection for me can make them a tad frustratingly combative at times. For my part, if anything were ever to happen to you, why, something tells me I would absolutely lose my mind with fury,” she said with a tinkle of a laugh.

Leelee debated how to respond to that. She’d assumed that both the head court lady and the prince had stronger Gen blood than anything, but they *were* both descendants of the Kou clan too. Moreover, she’d seen how menacing Reirin was when driven by righteous indignation during the Ghost Festival.

“I...guess?”

“You’re part of my inner circle now, Leelee.”

The gentle words stole Leelee’s breath away.

Still kneeling, Reirin carried on in an effort to persuade her. “I won’t let our bond be severed here, and I would never permit you to be executed. I will protect those in my inner circle from anything and everything, no matter the cost. That goes for you, Tousetsu, and Her Majesty alike.” Then, she giggled and narrowed her gaze with a hint of mischief. “And one other person too.”

She cast a glance toward the wall. Somewhere beyond it, Kou Reirin—no, Shu Keigetsu—was sure to be holed up inside her room.

Leelee sighed, then muttered, “You’re too nice for your own good. Either that or you’re an awful judge of character.”

“Come now, Leelee. Don’t you think you’re taking ‘not mincing your words’ a little too far...?” Reirin muttered sadly, only to go wide-eyed at what happened next.

With a small huff, Leelee crouched down near the wall.

“Give me a break. Sure, I’ve thought that I wouldn’t mind getting down on my knees for you, but I never dreamed I’d be doing it to get you over a wall.”

Despite her grumbling, there wasn’t a trace of hesitation in how firmly she had planted her elbows and knees on the ground. *C’mon*, she prompted her mistress with her gaze.

Reirin broke into a smile like a flower bursting into bloom. “Thank you, Leelee.”

“Just don’t break my back, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Measuring the distance with her eyes, Reirin took a few steps back.

“I’m going to jump on you on the count of three, so brace yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And one last thing: Would you be interested in a gamboge gold robe?”

As she stared down at the gravel-strewn earth, Leelee gave a small smile.

“Of course...”

Or she *tried* to smile, but her tiny snuffle a moment later ruined it.

“I think that goes without saying,” she finished.

“Then I’ll bring that as a souvenir the next time I come see you.”

Leelee drew her lips into a thin line, fighting back her tears.

“One, two,” Reirin muttered as she kicked off the ground. “Three!”

Her toes bounced off Leelee’s back, sending her gliding through the air. She looked almost like a butterfly dancing through the sky as she effortlessly flipped herself over the wall.

A beat later, Leelee heard the satisfying tap of a landing.

“Thanks, Leelee. Please head back to the storehouse and get some rest. I’ll be sure to come find you later!”

And with that, she took off running.

Toward what had once been her own room in the Palace of the Golden Qilin.

To meet with Shu Keigetsu—and, most likely, to get her body back.

“Please...let everything go all right.”

It might have been the first time in Leelee’s life she had prayed for anything so earnestly.

Reluctant to leave the Kou Palace, she stayed where she was and stared silently up at the wall. The sky beyond the gate was a bright enough blue to be

blinding, and, in combination with the tension looming over the Palace of the Golden Qilin, it was a terribly unsettling sight.

Leelee wasn't even a Kou, and still she felt a deep sense of unrest.

Something terrible was about to unfold in the inner court—that truth was so plain to see that it felt like she could very well reach out and touch it.

No... There's no point in sticking around here. There's nothing for me to do at the Kou Palace. I should head back to the storehouse so I can act from the Shu side of things if something happens.

How long had she been standing around? Leelee clenched her hands into fists as if to grab a firm hold on her returning composure.

Just as she was about to leave the Kou Palace, however, she saw a figure running her way with enough force to kick up gravel in its wake. Leelee quickly ducked behind one of the light posts set up at various spots along the wall.

She turned only her head to see what was going on, and her eyes widened upon discovering who it was.

The one who had rushed to the gate and began frantically banging upon the doors was Gyoumei.

“Open the gate!”

“Your Highness! Please don't do this. A seal has been hung over the Palace of the Golden Qilin. We mustn't take our chances of letting the diseased qi spread to you. I ask that you return to the main palace—” one of the accompanying eunuchs began to admonish him, but he refused to listen.

“Her Majesty is my mother. What's wrong with a son going to see his ailing mother?!”

“B-but...you are the crown prince before you are the empress's son. Even the heavens themselves would have you carry out your duties before paying a visit to a sick—”

“I've already done that. I've sent word to each palace, called upon the physicians, appointed a handful to trace the illness, and prepared to impose a gag order. Is that not enough? What more princely acts do you want from me?”

He interrupted the eunuch with the force of someone spewing blood. “Is it not enough that I can’t run straight to her side? I’m not even allowed a single glance upon a loved one?”

“Your Highness...”

“Leave me. I’m here not as the crown prince but for a brief, informal visit to check on the situation. Here inside this palace is my mother, and perhaps...”

Gyoumei trailed off, then pounded on the door in desperation once more.

“Open up. Now!” There was a note of supplication in his voice.

Beyond the fact that he’d followed after them, it was the next words he yelled that made Leelee gulp.

“You went this way, didn’t you?! Blast it... Wait... Let me hear what you have to say, Reirin!”

The one he referred to as Reirin was not the Maiden in the Kou Palace but the Maiden who just left *for* the Kou Palace.

Leelee’s heart leapt.

No way...

Breaking into a cold sweat, she clutched her hands to her chest.

He already—no, finally found out about the switch?!

Both Gyoumei’s actions and Reirin’s own words mercilessly confronted her with the fact that their idyllic life together would soon be coming to an end.

“...”

Leelee bit down hard on her lip. Before long, she exhaled a deliberate breath and found her resolve.

Even if he *was* the empress’s own son, she highly doubted that the Palace of the Golden Qilin would welcome the crown prince onto their plague-ridden grounds. In which case, there was a good chance that Gyoumei would double back to the Shu Palace storehouse. Someone needed to be there to handle the cover-up.

Balling her hands into fists, Leelee quietly left the Palace of the Golden Qilin

behind.

After a long time away from the Palace of the Golden Qilin, Reirin found it shrouded in a pall of gloom. The cloister was dead quiet, and the trees so carefully arranged throughout the garden seemed to wilt where they stood.

First things first. I need to find out how Her Majesty is doing.

Her initial idea had been to talk with Keigetsu, undo the switch, and then go draw the Bow of Warding in her own body. On second thought, she realized that she could conduct an examination and prescribe medicine just fine from inside Keigetsu's vessel. She had amended her plan to checking on the empress, arranging for a decoction, and then having her discussion with Keigetsu while the medicine helped her pull through.

Reirin had been determined to force her way into Kenshū's chambers even if it meant smacking down all the court ladies in her path, but in the end, she made it all the way to the innermost parts of the palace without running into anyone.

What are the court ladies doing? she thought with a frown, but as she drew closer to Kenshū's chambers, the situation became clear.

"Your Majesty! Keep it together, Your Majesty!"

"Someone fetch me a washbasin!"

"We should fan her."

"No, we should keep her feet warm!"

The room was thronged with Kou Palace court ladies running around like headless chickens. Upon closer inspection, the ones panicking were mostly Kenshū's older attendants. Seeing their robust mistress, who had never so much as caught a cold, abruptly develop such serious symptoms had them rattled. They weren't going about their work very efficiently.

Tousetsu and the rest of Reirin's court ladies dispatched to the scene were doing their damndest to correct their course—they had plenty of experience nursing a sick patient, after all—but given the size of the crowd, their advice

was swallowed up in all the hustle and bustle. Normally, one shout from Kenshuu would have been all it took to cleave the commotion in two, but given that the woman in question was the one whimpering in bed, the situation showed no signs of improving.

Reirin couldn't bear to stand by and watch this. "Please calm down. The denizens of the palace that reigns over earth mustn't be so flighty," she cut in, knowing full well how impolite she was being.

The court ladies snapped around all at once, then erupted into a flurry of whispers.

"Lady Shu Keigetsu?!"

"What is the Maiden of another clan doing in the Kou Palace?"

"The seal *was* posted outside, wasn't it?"

Perhaps due to the enormous amount of pressure they were under, the women looked irritated by this turn of events. Reirin could palpably sense wariness spread through their ranks like a cloud of ink in water, which quickly morphed into hostility directed her way.

"What are you doing here, Lady Shu Keigetsu? We ought to turn you over to the Eagle Eyes for trespassing on another clan's territory!"

"Wait, ladies," a deep voice cut in. "You mustn't do that. She is..."

It was Tousetsu. Knowing that her mistress was trapped inside Shu Keigetsu's body, she cast the Maiden an almost pleading look.

Don't mention the switch, Reirin begged with her gaze. Tousetsu chewed on her lip, then chose her next words carefully. "She is one of the precious Maidens of our court. Her dedication has been evident from the moment she drew the Bow of Warding for a full night. Surely she rushed here to help us as soon as she learned of Her Majesty's predicament."

Her explanation was a bit forced, but Tousetsu's low, even-toned voice made it sound more convincing.

The women considered her argument just long enough to lose steam, and Reirin took advantage of that moment to raise her voice. "Come, ladies! There

are far too many people in this room. The ventilation is lacking too.”

She breezed straight across the room and reached out for the closed lattice shutters. Once she’d cracked them halfway open to let the breeze in, she spun around to face the crowd.

“Her Majesty won’t be able to get any rest with all this fuss around her bed. Anyone ranked lower than gamboge gold should leave here at once. Trust the empress to us and focus on ventilating and disinfecting the rest of the palace. Two people have fallen ill in quick succession; I’m sure several of you have your concerns that the affliction might be contagious. For our own peace of mind, we ought to aerate and sterilize the grounds to the point of excess.”

Reirin knew it was a curse, but it was still vital to perform proper ventilation and disinfection on the off chance she was wrong. Plus, it seemed she was right that a few people had been worried; she noticed some of the ladies in the corner breathe sighs of relief as soon as she gave the decisive order.

“How is Her Majesty doing? What’s the apothecary’s prognosis?” Reirin asked, coming behind the partition screen and to the empress’s bedside while court ladies scurried out of the room in the background.

Kenshuu did nothing but moan with eyes screwed firmly shut, seemingly teetering on the edge of consciousness.

“The apothecary threw in the towel almost immediately, claiming he’d never seen such a high and sudden fever before. As you can see, her symptoms are so severe that she can’t even take a drink of water, let alone medicine. She retches every now and then, so we’ve been doing what we can to ease her nausea. Her breathing is erratic too.”

“Our first step should be to alleviate her symptoms. Turn her on her side to prevent her from choking on her vomit. Allow her to throw up as much as she can bear to. As for her breathing... Hmm, this doesn’t sound good. We should give her a drug to widen her airways.”

“But she’s in no state to inhale a powder.”

“Some medicine can be absorbed through the skin. Please apply ointment number fifty-three to her chest and back. It’s kept in the kitchen’s ice house.”

Reirin began firing off orders based on Tousetsu's rundown of the situation. "High fevers can be terribly draining, so we should do what we can to reduce her temperature externally. The damp cloth on her forehead is starting to get warm. Go ahead and change it out for a new one."

"Yes, ma'am."

"If her vomiting persists for too long, we'll need to take measures to prevent dehydration. Soak some cotton in water mixed with salt and sugar, then use that to moisten the inside of her mouth bit by bit. Can I put you in charge of assigning these tasks to the rest of the gamboge golds?"

"Certainly... That said, I am strictly considered to be Lady Reirin's attendant. I'm not confident anyone will obey an order of mine that involves laying a hand upon the empress."

The Maidens may have been the masters of their own court, but within the confines of the consort's palaces, they were nothing more than their guardians' wards.

Reirin met her competent retainer's concerns about overstepping her authority with an encouraging smile. "It'll be all right. I promise to shoulder the responsibility or what-have-you later. Throw your mistress's name around for all it's worth and get the job done! I know you have the persuasive power to pull it off," she said, brimming with confidence.

Tousetsu fell silent, overcome with emotion.

Then, she murmured, "Milady."

"What is it?"

"I'm...truly glad you came back," she said in a strangled whisper.

Upon closer inspection, her almond-shaped eyes were underscored with dark, heavy circles. Since the night before last, she had been confronted with the truth that her mistress had been someone else all along, stayed up all night working herself to the bone for Reirin, and been pulled into attending the empress's sickbed at dawn. She must have been well past the point of exhaustion.

Under normal circumstances, “Kou Reirin” would have taken over as the second-in-command of the Kou Palace, but seeing as the one driving her body was holed up in her room *and* a convalescent patient herself, there was no use counting on her.

A rueful smile rising to her face, Reirin reached out to tuck a lock of Tousetsu’s disheveled hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry for all the inconvenience, Tousetsu.”

Really, she thought to herself, what an arrogant and self-centered person I’ve been. All this time, there have been so many people looking to me and relying on me.

The reason she had been in no hurry to reverse the swap—going so far as to blithely indulge in the joys of a more robust body—was that she hadn’t realized what a big part of other people’s lives she was. Thus, she had used a little tongue-lashing as an excuse to stay away from the Palace of the Golden Qilin and made no effort to plead her case to the empress, instead taking the laid-back approach of letting the switch run its course.

Yet, in practice, that had caused countless people to worry for her sake, and her absence had left all these women at their wits’ end.

My idyllic days of trading places are over, she told herself, closing her eyes for a moment.

It was time to stop leaving the reversal of the switch up to Keigetsu under the pretense of respecting her wishes. No matter how much the girl cried and screamed—even if she had to grab her by the collar and force her hand—she was going to get her old body back. And then, she was going to find a peaceful resolution to the whole incident, Keigetsu’s fate included.

Reirin brought her face to the moaning empress’s ear. “Can you hear me, Your Majesty?”

“Ugh... Ah...”

Kenshuu’s face was ashen in spite of her raging fever. She couldn’t even answer the call between her pained whimpers.

The empress was Reirin’s beloved mother figure, always the picture of

steadfast and composed. Never before had she seen the woman look so weak.

“I promise to save you, no matter what it costs me.”

Reirin’s heart raced. Just thinking of the Noble Consort who had cast this venomcraft was enough to make her feel ill.

“...”

Right when Reirin bit down hard on her lip, Kenshuu’s eyes cracked open a sliver. It didn’t seem that she had regained full consciousness. Her arm groped unsteadily through the air like she was searching for something. Reirin reached out to take that hand between her own without a moment’s hesitation.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Can you hear me?”

Although the empress did not speak, she gave Reirin’s hand a single squeeze. Her grip had the strength befitting a woman who so loved to train. It was a quiet encouragement. A vow to fight together.

She’s going to be all right...

Reirin’s vision blurred with tears. She hurried to blink them away. Her emotions felt so much more unstable ever since the switch. Could it be a consequence of all the time she had spent in Shu Keigetsu’s body?

It’s going to be all right. It is. I just know it.

With one last return squeeze, she exhaled a long breath and let go of Kenshuu’s hand. Now was no time to be getting sentimental.

“Her Majesty is holding strong against the malady that ails her. I ask you to all have faith in her and carry out your respective duties. Tousetsu—head court lady to the Maiden! Allow me to share a few points to watch out for during the caretaking process. As an outsider, I’ll be stepping aside now, so I’m counting on you to handle the rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After leaving Tousetsu with a few more pieces of advice, Reirin turned swiftly on her heel. She was at last headed for her own room—where Keigetsu awaited her.

“Um, Lady Tousetsu...” As one of the court ladies observed how gallantly the Maiden strode off into the distance and how much Reirin had managed to bolster Tousetsu’s morale in a matter of minutes, she ventured to ask, “Who *was* she?”

The question held a fearful “what if” more than simple surprise or admiration.

This “Shu Keigetsu” had treated Tousetsu almost as if she were a trusted retainer of hers. She had opened the lattice shutters and fired off orders like she owned the place, and even named the location of an ointment known only to the residents of the Kou Palace.

“Could she be...?” she began, inclining herself forward with a look of horror.

“Taking care of Her Majesty comes first,” Tousetsu said flatly.

She wanted nothing more than to bewail the unfair treatment her beloved mistress had suffered. But that was exactly what that very mistress had asked her not to do.

All Tousetsu could do was abide by Reirin’s wishes and put her all into supporting Empress Kenshoo.

It was when she was standing outside the door to her room that Reirin started to wonder how she should announce herself. Her voice would no doubt refuse to form the words “Lady Keigetsu” or “It’s Reirin.” Though frustrated by the ongoing inconvenience of the silencing spell, after some debate, Reirin called out “Milady!” through the door.

“It’s me,” she went on, raising her voice a little. “Please open up. You’ve heard what’s happening around the Palace of the Golden Qilin, haven’t you? I need to speak with you immediately.”

Fortunately, all the court ladies had gathered near Kenshoo’s room, so there wasn’t another soul in sight. It didn’t take long for her to hear a few noises from behind the door.

“Is that you?” came a voice. “Is there anyone else around?”

“No. It’s just me,” Reirin asserted.

After a short pause, the door creaked open. Standing there was the emaciated figure of Kou Reirin—or rather, Shu Keigetsu.

For the first time in the nine days since the Double Sevens Festival, Reirin and Keigetsu came face-to-face.

No. Thinking about it, this might be the very first time I've ever looked Lady Keigetsu straight in the eye like this.

Though Keigetsu was wearing her own looks, curiously enough, the presence of a different soul in the vessel kept it from feeling anything like looking in a mirror. Each glance at those eyes swimming with self-doubt and those white fingers clutching the doorway in trepidation gave her the strangest sense that it was indeed Shu Keigetsu she was looking at.

The same probably went for the other girl. Keigetsu gasped and jerked her head back like she'd been bowled over, then dragged Reirin into the room without any further discussion.

A silence stretched between the pair as they each debated where to begin.

The first to break it was, unsurprisingly, Reirin. "There's no time to spend on introductions or formalities. I'll get straight to the point."

"S-sure."

"Please reverse the swap right here and now." When Keigetsu only nibbled at her lip in apprehension, Reirin scolded her. "What reason is there to hesitate? Tousetsu already knows the truth. So does Leelee. Even the captain of the Eagle Eyes is beginning to have his doubts. I managed to fool His Highness earlier, but there's no telling how long we can keep that up. This switch is doomed, Lady Keigetsu."

"..."

"I had hoped to take the more amicable route and allow you as much time as you needed, but the situation has changed. Her Majesty has been incapacitated by a venomcraft. I need to go back to being 'Kou Reirin' and save her life."

It seemed she could say both Keigetsu's and her own name as long as she was conversing with the girl herself. Or would it work only when they were in the

same space together? Reirin once again pondered the wonders of the Daoist arts in the back of her mind, while Keigetsu was more concerned with the distressing bit of information dumped on her.

“Her Majesty was incapacitated? By a venomcraft?”

“Did the court ladies neglect to so much as inform you through the door? From what I hear, she’s been in a great deal of pain since yesterday... The reason the girls stopped coming near your room is that they’ve had their hands full taking care of her. Of course, I’m sure it didn’t hurt that Tousetsu chased everyone off either. The innermost sanctum of the Kou Palace is in an uproar.”

“I’ve been hiding under the blankets all this time, so I had no idea...” Keigetsu muttered, still stunned. “Then...I was right. That really *was* the Noble Consort’s goal.”

That told Reirin that she and Keigetsu had arrived at the same conclusion.

“Yes. Her original plan may have been to kill me and then move on to her next target, but it’s possible I deflected the curse from ‘Kou Reirin’ with the Bow of Warding and transferred it to Her Majesty prematurely. Does that theory sound plausible from a practitioner’s perspective?”

“It does. The Noble Consort may only have specified ‘a noblewoman of the Kou Palace’ as the target of her spell. In most cases, a curse goes for the weakest prey first. That’s why the venomcraft went straight to you—or me, technically—and when it was repelled, it headed off to its next victim.”

Despite coming off as rather dull and unintelligent most of the time, Keigetsu was quite reliable when the subject was the Daoist arts.

Reirin nodded and then leaned forward. “I want to draw the Bow of Warding one more time to exorcise the curse. However, His Highness has claimed that I... or rather, the ‘Shu Keigetsu’ he knows is not to be trusted, and he refuses to hand me the sacred weapon. Hence why I must return to being Kou Reirin this instant. When I do, I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to lend me the bow as the empress’s own niece.”

Keigetsu stared back at Reirin as she rambled on with enthusiasm. Then, as her gaze traveled down to the wet cloth tied around her hand, her eyes went

wide. The makeshift bandage was stained with blood all over.

“Hey! What’s with all that blood?!”

“Hm? Oh, I drew the bow a little too much, see... I’m sorry for all the damage I’ve done to your body. But it’s...er, how to put it...only a few scrapes.”

“A few *scrapes* wouldn’t bleed that much!”

“Huh? Are you certain? I’ve been able to go about my daily routine without issue, so it feels to me as though everyone is overreacting.”

Reirin’s confused tilt of her head struck Keigetsu with a sudden thought: Gyomei had claimed he wouldn’t lend the Bow of Warding to a villainess. But perhaps the truth was that he had simply been concerned about her wounds.

Still, His Highness worrying about “Shu Keigetsu”...? Is that even possible?

Given Gyomei’s devotion to “Kou Reirin,” it was hard to imagine him showing concern for any of the other Maidens—or, no, perhaps that in itself made it plausible that he might sense a glimpse of her soul and find himself drawn to even “Shu Keigetsu” herself.

Whatever the case, Keigetsu pulled a face at Reirin’s willful determination to keep drawing the bow in her sorry state. “There’s no reason *you* have to be the one to draw it. Just have one of the military officers or eunuchs handle it. If I recall, the sacred treasures are under the Gen clan’s jurisdiction, and the captain of the Eagle Eyes is a descendant of that line. Won’t the strings produce a clearer sound if you let him do the job? It’s not like you’re the only person in the world who can do it or anything.”

As self-loathing crept in, she added that perhaps that went to show which of them was the purehearted one, only for Reirin to stare back at her with a look of shock. “Lady Keigetsu...”

“What? Yeah, fine, I get it. It was a lazy idea. Excuse me for—”

“You’re completely right. That didn’t even occur to me,” Reirin went on in a dazed mutter.

“Huh?!” Keigetsu blurted out without even thinking.

“I’ve just been so convinced that *I* had to act... I couldn’t bear to sit still, so I

got it into my head that I had to be the one to fix everything..." Reirin held her face between her hands, growing more crestfallen by the second. "That silly preconception of mine led me to tell off His Highness...talk big to Leelee...jump the wall...even step on her... I-Is this what they call 'spinning one's wheels'...? What a terrifying thing an excess of stamina can be..."

Keigetsu wondered about a few of the more alarming terms mixed in there, but more pressingly, she was perturbed to see Reirin hurtle down into the dumps so fast. "Wh-what's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"I'm so sorry, Lady Keigetsu. As I reflect back on what utterly irrational behavior my bountiful stamina and emotions drove me to, I'm paralyzed with the greatest shame I've ever felt in my life."

"You can be shockingly sensitive in the strangest of ways, you know that?!" the other Maiden snapped in spite of herself. When Reirin's eyes at last began to water with a sob, Keigetsu awkwardly averted her gaze. "Besides, it was a half-baked solution to begin with. You draw a bow to dispel the curse haunting her, and then what? That's like batting a mosquito away with your hand instead of squashing it. It won't resolve anything."

"Yes... I suppose you're right..."

"Well, that's about what I'd expect from the Maiden who wouldn't even kill an insect. If someone curses you, the only right response is to curse them back."

"I'd taken you for a coward, but you can be shockingly bold in the strangest of ways," Reirin said, surprised. Then, she hesitantly added, "But still, cursing her back...? Wouldn't that make Noble Consort Shu the one to suffer next?"

"That's the risk that comes with cursing someone."

After a beat of silence, Keigetsu shrugged her shoulders. In all likelihood, that was the sort of world in which she had lived. Hate and be hated. Hurt and get hurt. Negative emotions were amplified through their repetition. Those who cursed others would end up cursed themselves.

Reirin alone had refused to be part of the cycle. No matter how much Keigetsu despised her, she had accepted it all with a serene smile, leaving Keigetsu stranded without an outlet for those emotions.

Now here she was having a peaceful conversation with her worst enemy. The situation was both so mystifying and oddly disconcerting that she carried on with the topic of the venomcraft despite having little desire to talk about it. “But even if you did want to fight poison with poison, you’d have to start by gathering up the bugs to make the venomcraft. Then it would take several days of waiting for it to come to completion. Perhaps it’s easier said than done, after —”

“Oh!” Just as Keigetsu was explaining the impracticality of her own plan with a touch of self-derision, Reirin’s hanging head snapped back to attention. ““What, you planning to *curse* someone?”” she mumbled in a tone of voice far too rough to suit her. It sounded almost like something a working-class girl might say.

“Huh?” Keigetsu frowned, failing to make out the words.

Then, Reirin brought her face to Keigetsu’s so fast she seemed ready to grab the girl by the collar. “As long as you have a bug that survived a feeding frenzy, is it possible to bounce the curse back on the spot?”

“Huh? Sure. Though the Noble Consort’s venomcraft looked like a spider, so it’d have to be a bug big enough to prey on that,” Keigetsu explained nervously, daunted by the other girl’s enthusiasm.

“A bug that can prey on a spider...” Reirin’s eyes lit up. “Lady Keigetsu!”

“What?”

“Let’s go!”

After all that, she simply grabbed Keigetsu by the arm and began marching out the door.

Keigetsu’s eyes darted about in a panic. “Wh-what are you doing?!”

“I’ll explain later! We’re going to break out through the back door. Come along now! Hurry!”

And so it was that Reirin abducted Keigetsu, forcibly removing her from the palace where she had taken refuge.

Chapter 6:

Reirin Fights

AROUND THE SAME TIME Reirin had snuck out of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, Gyoumei was still banging on the doors of the main gate.

“Open up!” There was a strong note of impatience to the regal boom of his voice.

A shadow suddenly loomed over his handsome eyes. Gyoumei cast a dubious glance skyward, then sucked in a quiet breath at what he saw. Dark clouds were slowly rolling into the sky that had been so painfully blue only moments earlier.

“The qi is spiraling out of control...”

As one who bore the qi of the dragon, picking up on disturbances in the surrounding forces came as second nature to him.

He sensed fear. Distress. It was as though nature itself was afraid to see Empress Kenshuu—the mother of the nation and a woman of the clan who presided over earth—so feebly teetering on the edge of life and death.

I can't let this consume me.

He stood his ground as he felt himself sliding toward dread. To be concerned and to grow anxious were two different things. Given his position as the crown prince, he wasn't allowed to lose his head just because his mother was in critical condition.

The crown prince, eh?

His mouth twisted into a bitter grimace.

“L-Look at those foreboding clouds, Your Highness! This is an ill omen. Let us return to the main palace at once.”

“He's right. You are the noble soul meant to lead the next generation of Ei. We mustn't expose you to calamity.”

“The inner court is the women's domain. As our crown prince, we ask that

you return to your rightful place posthaste. I'm sure the strong light of your dragon's qi will provide encouragement to His Majesty and the residents of the main palace alike."

His attendants pleaded with him one after another. Dismayed by Gyoumei's incessant demands to open the gate, they had been attempting to talk him down for quite a while now. The men firmly believed that the kingdom's heir was to be kept away from death, and above all else, they wanted to keep Gyoumei and his strong yang qi in *their* domain for their own peace of mind.

He was to diligently carry out his duties, swiftly hand out orders whenever the need arose, and offer the protection of his strong dragon's qi. Those were the duties everyone expected of the "crown prince" known as Gyoumei.

Prince this, prince that...

He had to be fair and competent. That was the guiding principle he had imposed upon himself. But so long as he held himself to that standard, he would never have the chance to see his ailing loved ones, nor rush straight to apologize to someone he had greatly wronged.

An attendant leaned forward to plead with him. "Your Highness, the clouds —"

"Call for the exorcist," he ordered. "I've already arranged for him to begin his work around the hour of the sheep. Move that up an hour and alert everyone to the change in schedule. Knowing that we're taking swift measures to deal with the issue should ease the minds of the palace denizens."

"Certainly..."

"Make doubly certain that the physicians will keep their silence. In most cases, word of an illness gets around due to the incoming supply of medicine. Replace the guards at each gate with someone more tight-lipped. I've had the captain of the Eagle Eyes pin down a few good candidates already. Go to his office to get the list. Send each Maiden a length of high-end silk as a reward for their performances at the Ghost Festival rite. It should make for a decent distraction, and they're bound to stay shut up in their palaces if they're busy with embroidery work."

“Y-yes, Your Highness.”

“I’ve sent a written report directly to His Majesty. There is no need to advertise Her Majesty’s condition around the main palace otherwise. In fact, I want you to act as though her symptoms are mild—enough so that she can afford to accept a visit from me.”

The eunuchs responded to his rapid-fire orders with hasty nods.

Yet as soon as Gyoumei said, “I need you all to return to the main palace with smiles on your faces and spread the word,” they began to protest with looks of concern.

“Half an hour,” the prince declared, dropping his gaze ever so slightly. “I won’t stay any longer than that. Now leave me.”

Perhaps cowed by the intensity in his voice, the eunuchs exchanged glances before retreating, dejected.

Gyoumei gazed up at the firmly shut gate one more time. No longer bothering to raise his voice, he gently pressed a hand to the doors.

“Please open.”

Two of his loved ones lay beyond the gate: the mother he respected and the woman who had taught him what it meant to love.

Both Kenshuu and Reirin were Kou women. He knew they didn’t want to be protected. If he rushed to her side in concern, his mother in particular would probably snort and say, “If you have the time to waste on this, spend it protecting someone else.”

But Reirin? He just couldn’t help but worry about the girl he had deemed his beloved butterfly.

“You went this way, didn’t you, Reirin?”

Gyoumei recalled the sight of her from behind as she left the storehouse without a single backward glance. He knew that under her lithe appearance was a strong backbone and that she had a surprisingly stubborn side to her. As did he know that her ephemeral smile belied a downright staggering reckless streak.

No doubt she would put her life on the line to save the empress. She would barge into the Palace of the Golden Qilin still wearing the Shu Maiden's form, tend to Kenshuu without a care for coming into contact with the diseased qi, and confront her enemy of Shu Keigetsu without hesitation. If she found a way to rescue the empress, she would see it done whether it meant tearing the skin on her hands or working herself to collapse. It was *because* he understood that about her that he was beside himself with worry.

"Reirin. Let me hear you out..."

Above all else, he was desperate to apologize. Her matter-of-fact tone and the placid look on her face when she told him she had thrown out her expectations kept coming back to haunt him.

She meant everything to him.

When he watched her tumble over the balustrade, he felt the urge to kill Shu Keigetsu for the very first time. He had rejoiced at the warmth of her body as she leaned on him, been moved by the unprecedented sight of her tears, and vowed to eliminate the source of her sorrow at the cost of averting his eyes from his own misgivings and the admonitions of those around him. Yet all any of that had done was hurt her.

"Please...!"

He clenched his hands into tight fists and slammed them against the gate one last time.

"Who goes there? As you can see, there is a seal placed upon the Palace of the Golden Qilin to prevent the spread of disease. If this is an urgent matter, I ask that you state your business right here and now."

For the first time, there came an answer from the other side of the gate. The stern voice belonged to a court lady with the authority to drive off visitors at her own discretion. That meant that it had to be a gamboge gold, and likely one of the head court ladies among them, who had shown up to greet him. Given that the empress's main attendant was bound to have her hands full nursing her mistress, he had to assume that this was the Maiden's head court lady, Tousetsu.

Gyoumei promptly pressed himself up against the door. “Tousetsu! You must be Tousetsu. Did Reirin—no, Shu Keigetsu—come this way?”

He sensed her gasp behind the door.

That was all it took to convince Gyoumei: Tousetsu knew the truth.

“Open the gate.”

“...”

“Would you disobey an order from the crown prince, Kou Tousetsu? I said to open the gate,” he growled.

At length, the gate hesitantly creaked open. The one kneeling there with her head bowed low was indeed Tousetsu, Reirin’s head court lady.

“It’s a pleasure to see you, Your Imperial Highness.”

“No need for formalities; this is urgent. Stand. I have no intention of interrupting Her Majesty’s treatment, so give me a simple yes or no answer. Did Shu Keigetsu come this way?”

“...”

Tousetsu’s doll-like, emotionless face was taut with tension. After a long pause, she murmured, “Yes.”

Before he could stop himself, Gyoumei reached out to shake her by the shoulders. “You know, don’t you?”

“...”

“Answer me, Tousetsu!”

Even the woman nicknamed “the glacial court lady” went pale in the face of Gyoumei’s fierce rage. Nevertheless, after pursing her lips, she averted her gaze and replied, “I cannot say.”

To respond that way to such an ill-defined question was an answer in and of itself.

His temper flaring, Gyoumei raised his voice. “Why not? Why won’t you answer me?! Didn’t Reirin switch places with Shu Keigetsu? Didn’t she have her body stolen from her? Why wouldn’t you come forward to me about such a

transgression against your mistress?!”

“Because that is my punishment!” she yelled back, forgetting herself. In a rare sight, her irises quivered with emotion. “Not only did I fail to recognize my dearest mistress’s predicament, but I drove her further into a corner. It is because I neither heard her plead the truth nor reached out to her during her crisis that I am punishing myself by holding back when I want to reach out the most.”

“What...?”

“It would be well within your power to defy Lady Reirin’s will and turn the current situation around. Hence, you are the one person to whom I can never divulge the truth. Nor can I allow you to enter the palace at this time.” Tousetsu’s voice trembled throughout her answer, a sign that she was fighting down a tempest of violent emotion.

As she spoke, sounding very much like she was struggling to convince herself, Gyoumei realized what was going on: Tousetsu *wanted* to tell him. She yearned for nothing more than to punish Shu Keigetsu for snatching Reirin’s body and putting her life in danger, but her mistress’s orders and her own crushing guilt stayed her hand.

“Reirin told you to stay quiet, didn’t she?”

“...”

“I know the depths of your loyalty. If it was her order, not even an imperial decree from the crown prince himself could make you talk.”

Gyoumei was all too familiar with the nature of the head court lady who had devoted herself to Reirin. She was a combination of the stubborn bloodline of earth and the bloodline of water whose emotions raged for but one special person—the worst kind of woman to have as an enemy. Flaunting his authority as the prince wouldn’t get him anywhere; she would take her own life before she broke her silence.

“You claim you can’t tell me because I would turn the situation around?”

“...”

“Why? Because of the authority I hold? Because I would punish Shu Keigetsu against Reirin’s will?” His attempt to confirm the facts soon devolved into self-deprecation.

Prince this, prince that...

He found his own lot in life to be laughable. As the crown prince, he held the greatest influence over the Maiden Court as its master. He had been in a better position to save Reirin from her predicament than anyone, yet he had relinquished the opportunity of his own accord. Not only that—his duties as the court’s leader had prevented him from even making an immediate apology, and in the end, his authority was the very reason he was forbidden from interfering.

Impatience, anger, and especially self-loathing welled up inside him. Led by impulse, his hand flew to his crown and plucked it from atop his head.

“Your Highness?!”

“Let me through, Tousetsu. Please.”

His topknot fell to pieces like the rest of him. It wasn’t long before his flawlessly coiffed hair came unraveled, whipping against his shoulders in the wind. The one standing there was no longer the perfectly groomed crown prince. He was nothing more than a man worried for his beloved, a mess of guilt down to the hair on his head.

“What are you doing, Your Highness?!”

“I swear to you that I won’t abuse my power. So please, let me see Reirin.”

Tousetsu’s face contorted with horror upon seeing the proud crown prince take off his own crown to her. Even without the gesture, his passion came through palpably enough to tingle like needles against her skin.

“I’m begging you.”



“ ... ”

At length, Tousetsu exhaled a long breath and took a deliberate step backward. With a loud creak, the heavy gate opened the rest of the way inward.

“Ah! You have my thanks, Tousetsu.”

“No need. There were no grounds for a mere court lady to spurn the crown prince in the first place.”

As she drew open the gate, Tousetsu made up her mind. Her mistress had commanded that her penalty be her silence. If at all possible, she had wanted to see that order through. Even so, she wished just as desperately to see the woman who had wronged her mistress punished—and to go further, to see herself punished too.

You're too kind, Lady Reirin. Both she and I must suffer a much more grueling punishment.

Someone had to restore the proper order and protect her altruistic mistress on her own behalf. Surely the man standing before her wouldn't hesitate to bring down the hammer in Reirin's stead. Despite his claims that he wouldn't abuse his authority, he was none other than the crown prince clad in the dragon's qi.

“Come with me.” Tousetsu invited Gyoumei through the open gate. Realizing full well that the dam of her stifled emotions had broken, she said, “I shall tell you all I know along the way.”

Not even the tethers of reason could hold her once she'd run wild.

Confronted with the true depths of her water-like nature, Tousetsu's lips twisted into the smallest of grimaces.

“Captain! Caaaptaaaain! A mere civil servant can't smuggle out a national heirloom like the Bow of Warding without permission—not even the Eagle Eyes' Gen-hailing captain! There's this little thing called 'protocol,' I'll have you know! First you have to send a letter of request to all the relevant authorities, then once you've received their authorization—”

“Can it,” Shin-u snarled at Bunkou, a surly look on his face as the eunuch clung to his sleeve and whined.

This conversation was taking place in the cloister that led to the archery range.

Thick clouds hung in the sky beyond the roof. Shin-u’s brow furrowed as he noticed the chilly breeze that had begun to blow through despite it being a summer afternoon. The air around the inner court had taken a tangible turn for the ominous.

Not that you’d know it from the way his subordinate stood blithely in his path and cried, “That’s so mean!”

Shin-u shoved him aside with no lack of annoyance. “Her Majesty’s crisis is a national emergency. In battle, do you ask permission to nock each arrow before loosing it at an enemy?”

“I do, as a matter of fact! My true enemies all happen to be tyrannical bosses or reckless authority figures, you see; I’m not about to take aim without covering my own hide first.”

“Smart-ass.” As he stepped briskly onto the range, Shin-u finally met Bunkou’s gaze. “What I’m about to do is entirely at my own discretion, and no blame will fall on the rest of the Eagle Eyes. I’ll even put it on record that you tried to stop me from making off with the bow. Now give it a rest already.”

“Oh, you will? Great. You’ll hear no more complaints from me, then.”

The self-serving subordinate stepped aside, his gratuitous tears drying in the blink of an eye. While he was at it, he even pulled up a chair from a corner of the training grounds and sat down for a break.

“So now *you’re* going to draw the Bow of Warding in prayer of Her Majesty’s recovery?” he said. “I’m a little surprised. To be quite honest, I didn’t think you were the type to believe in curses or superstition.”

“I’m not, generally speaking. Still, it’s a fact that Lady Kou Reirin’s illness ebbed as Shu Keigetsu drew her bow. It’s not unthinkable that a sacred weapon handed down for generations could harbor some kind of miracle power. Besides...” Shin-u gazed at the row of targets and adjusted where he stood. “If

even the villainess of the Maiden Court was ready to draw this bow for the empress, the captain of the Eagle Eyes can't sit on his hands." There was a strong determination hidden within his blasé tone.

What popped into his mind right then was the sight of the Shu Maiden clinging to Gyoumei and begging him to lend her the weapon.

"For heaven's sake, please let me have that bow!"

The woman who hadn't even begged for her life before a beast had gone red with the effort of her pleas. It was the first time Shin-u had seen anyone so desperate for the power to ensure another person's well-being—and someone from another clan, at that.

There was no need for His Highness to refuse her so bluntly, he thought in passing.

No, on some level, Shin-u realized that Gyoumei's protests had come from a place of concern. Even a skilled warrior like him could feel the mighty heft of the bow in his hands. It wasn't the kind of weapon to let a woman who had already torn up her hands and fainted draw a second time.

But...does that mean His Highness has begun to acknowledge Shu Keigetsu?

The Gyoumei he knew detested Shu Keigetsu. Even so, his eyes had borne a clear admiration of her during the Ghost Festival. As had his face drawn into a tortured frown when he stole a glance at her blood-soaked bandages.

His half brother's attitude toward Shu Keigetsu had no doubt begun to soften—to the point that he had let her leave without reproach after the dressing-down she'd given him.

Or...maybe not? He seemed surprised by something earlier.

A sense of misgiving nagged at him, but he was quick to shake it off. It wasn't his job to speculate on the crown prince's feelings. Shin-u's duty as the captain of the Eagle Eyes was to enforce discipline in both the Maiden Court and the inner court as a whole, as well as to eliminate all potential dangers.

As if I would leave everything up to a Maiden. It's the Eagle Eyes' job to take up arms and stave off all misfortune and foes.

He adjusted his grip on the giant bow in his hand.

Until just earlier, he had been waiting around the Eagle Eyes' office to head off Shu Keigetsu's attempted theft, but much to his surprise, she had never shown up. Apparently, she'd taken a different route to saving the empress.

That suits me fine, Shin-u had thought to himself.

Nothing said that *she* had to draw the bow to the point of breaking the law and incurring Gyomei's wrath. The Bow of Warding would prove much more effective in the hands of Shin-u, whose veins ran with the blood of both the emperor and the clan under the divine patronage of water. As he had watched the dark clouds gather, he had made up his mind that *he* would be the one to pluck the string.

Let's both do our own part, shall we? I don't plan on falling behind.

When he closed his eyes, he saw the dignified face of a certain woman. Her gaze cut straight through him, neither fawning nor pleading. Or not quite—one moment she would be looking his way, then the next her gaze would slip off somewhere into the distance.

That elusive nature of hers held Shin-u's heart captive.

It dawned on him that he had the same mindset of a boy instinctively reaching out to touch a butterfly that fluttered through the air.

"Come pursue the matter once I'm sure of the truth, eh?"

His blood was pumping. It was the same elation he felt before his prey on the battlefield.

Just you wait, Shu Keigetsu.

Channeling the fighting spirit that welled up within him into the weapon, Shin-u leisurely assumed his stance.

He was an excellent archer. Between his height, physical strength, and hawkish nature so typical of the Gen clan, there wasn't a weapon in the world he couldn't wield. It was said that on the battlefield, he could slaughter a thousand enemies with only a hundred arrows. Whether it called for hitting dozens or even hundreds of bullseyes, dispelling the malady was sure to prove

an easy task.

And with that done, he would make short work of his remaining affairs and take his sweet time hunting Shu Keigetsu.

He nocked his arrow in a silent motion and drew it to his cheek. The simple gesture demanded enough strength to make a woman sweat with the effort, but Shin-u made it look as smooth and effortless as a dance.

The bow almost seemed to bend to his arms. It fit comfortably in his hands. This was the talent of a Gen descendant in action.

He leaned into his weapon as naturally as he drew breath—

“Ah!”

Just then, Shin-u’s eyes snapped wide open. His instincts were alerting him to danger.

Plink!

In the next moment, the Bow of Warding’s string snapped in two. Even after Shin-u had scrambled to release his stance, the impact was strong enough to graze his cheek. The once-pliant string drooped and tangled itself around his arm. Its pitiful end seemed to attest that it had used up the last of its strength.

“Whaaaat?! The Bow of Warding broke?!” Bunkou cried out from behind him, half rising to his feet.

“...”

Shin-u pinched the string between his fingers with a grim expression.

“Wh-what are we going to do?! This is a disaster, Captain!” his subordinate screamed, clutching his head. “D-destroying a national heirloom is a crime punishable by death! See? I knew a brute like you shouldn’t have touched it!”

“No,” said Shin-u. “A bow strong enough to be extolled as a national treasure wouldn’t buckle under a little muscle. Never once has it snapped in all the centuries since it was first strung. To the contrary—I’ve heard that it’s sturdy enough to take off a man’s fingers if he doesn’t pull with enough force.”

“Then why did it break *now*?!”

Shin-u didn't answer the question. Instead, he stroked the bow in silence. The weapon had been so compliant in his grip. By the time he held it at the ready, it had almost seemed to bend to his arms.

No. "Bend" isn't the right word...

It had *clung* to him.

As he stared down at the weapon's limp figure, Shin-u frowned. Was it strange of him to think that the bow had been frightened of something? It seemed almost like finding its way into the familiar arms of a Gen had relieved it of an enormous burden, breaking its tension in the most literal sense.

The Bow of Warding was overwhelmed?

He was almost appalled by the absurdity of his own suggestion. Still, more a hunch than a theory, the idea weighed on his mind with a surprising heft.

By what, exactly?

Though a weapon could tell no tales, the Bow of Warding was powerful enough to give off a sense of pride. It was hard to imagine that the giant bow said to scare off disease with the sound of its vibrations and crush a malady upon striking a target would cower before the illness that had assailed Kou Reirin. The Bow of Warding was the work of a trueborn craftsman among the Gens, masters of water and warfare. It would strike any enemy true, unflinching even before a blazing fire.

There was but one thing that could even hope to outclass it.

Earth qi?

Earth obstructs water. The weight of the earth could still even raging waters.

Struck with the sudden sense that a piece of a puzzle had fallen into place, Shin-u's heart began to race.

Shu Keigetsu had drawn a bow she was meant to be incompatible with for over six hours. At first, all her arrows had stopped short of the target, but her accuracy had steadily improved over time until she had at last managed to strike home.

It was almost as if she had conquered the bow itself—as if she had earth qi

that had suppressed the opposing water qi.

“...”

His eyes going wide, Shin-u stared at one of the targets. It was the target that sat above an embankment piled with fallen arrows, a lone shaft lodged firmly in its bullseye.

She had looked beautiful as she nocked her arrows. She had stood tall, her gaze unwavering and not a drop of energy wasted in her stance. The same had been true of her during her Ghost Festival dance. Her core had been firm down to the tips of her fingers, yet still she had been as supple as a butterfly dancing in the wind. Even the military officers had been impressed by her form.

Hadn't he seen something similar in the countless rites and dances he'd witnessed?

“No way...”

He thought back to how the “Shu Keigetsu” he'd seen around the storehouse had put a hand to her cheek and giggled. At long last, he understood what had felt off to him about the gesture.

It was the exact same gesture the prince's “butterfly”—Kou Reirin—would make when she was flustered.

She was the prince's favored Maiden, whose good behavior meant that Shin-u had few chances to interact with her in his capacity as captain. Still, even he could conjure up images of her placid demeanor, gentle tone of voice, and above all else, the breathtakingly beautiful form she flaunted each time she danced.

“If you are truly the one praised as our benevolent ruler, my kindhearted cousin...”

She had referred to Gyomei as her “cousin” as if it were second nature.

“To start feeling the pain before I've even been bitten would be nothing but a waste of strength.”

She had seemed awfully accustomed to the fear of death.

Ever since the night of the Double Sevens Festival, “Kou Reirin” had begun to

fawn over Gyoumei and sleep the days away without a care for appearances, while “Shu Keigetsu” had become a hard worker who smiled benevolently upon even the Eagle Eyes and court ladies.

“So *that’s* what it was!” Shin-u shouted, flipping around and abruptly casting the bow aside.

“Captain?!” Bunkou nearly shrieked. “W-wait, where are you going?! I mean, what are you planning?! Y-you *are* going to make a note that I had nothing to do with any of this, right?!”

“I’m heading back to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.”

“Huh...?” As Shin-u left the archery range behind, Bunkou called after him with a face white as a sheet. “But my repooooort!”

Around the same time, near the back gate of the Shu Palace, one girl had doubled over wheezing while another offered her a shoulder to lean on.

“Hang in there, Lady Keigetsu! Exhaling is more important than inhaling. Hee-hee-hoo! That’s the trick!”

“Huff...! Huff...! Hold...on... I only just...left my sickbed!”

“Believe in the power of fighting spirit. Once you figure out the right way to breathe, even that body can run while on the mend. I guarantee it.”

Despite her words of encouragement, Reirin didn’t slow her pace for a second. Keigetsu was so strapped for breath that she couldn’t even manage to berate her.

After their hurried conversation, the pair had escaped through an opening in the Kou Palace walls too small to even qualify as a back gate. Not much later, Reirin had taken them on a “shortcut” through a thicket, so there hadn’t been much chance to ask about her plan along the way. Keigetsu was still clueless as to what she had gotten herself into when she arrived at the innermost depths of the Shu Palace—the storehouse to which “Shu Keigetsu” had been exiled.

“Milady!” The moment the duo set foot on the beautifully landscaped yard, the pale-faced Leelee looked up from where she had been pacing outside the

storehouse. Initially surprised to see the two girls together, she glanced back and forth between them with a look of confusion. “Did you manage to undo the switch?”

“I’m sorry, Leelee! Let’s set that matter aside. We have more important things to be worrying about right now!”

“Hey! Don’t just stand there like a useless lump! Do something to stop this berserker woman!”

“Oh. That looks like a no,” said Leelee. The sight of “Kou Reirin,” white-faced and screaming, while “Shu Keigetsu” marched bravely ahead gave her an instant grasp of the situation.

Heedless of the way Leelee’s face twitched, Reirin cut across the garden and picked up a small jar tucked away in its depths. Her whole face lighting up, she spun around to the other two girls and said, “Here it is! I have it, Lady Keigetsu! Look—it’s a centipede that ate the rest of the insects trapped with it!”

“Why do you even have that?!” Keigetsu shrieked back.

“Huh?” Discomfited, Reirin put a hand to her cheek. “Well, um, you see...”

According to her explanation, she had once attempted to keep the bugs Leelee dumped in her garden—as a “prank”—as food for her rat, but since she believed it would be wrong to help herself to Keigetsu’s personal belongings, she had thrown them all together in the only oil jar she had on hand. Within a few days, the centipede had eaten the rest—spiders and all—leaving it the sole survivor.

“The truth is, I’d never kept a centipede before... Given its size, I thought it might not get into a fight with the spiders, but that turned out to be a big mistake. What’s more, Mr. Rat didn’t seem to have an appetite for centipede... He refused to so much as touch it, leaving me with this lone survivor as a result.”

“Seriously? Your sense of manners really *did* lead you to create a venomcraft?” said Leelee. Even the culprit who had dropped the bug into her garden was shocked.

When Reirin informed her that the empress’s illness was the work of a curse,

and that Noble Consort Shu was the one who had concocted the venomcraft, a look of even greater shock crossed her face before she lapsed into silence.

“It sounds like the Noble Consort incited Lady Keigetsu to switch bodies with me as a plot to keep me away from Her Majesty. Once we had traded places, she arranged to have Lady Keigetsu killed to ensure her silence, disguising it as the work of the Kin clan’s Lady Seika.”

“She used the name of the Kin clan? Wait, then maybe the one who ordered me to harass you was actually...”

“Yes. We have reason to believe it was the Noble Consort. When I didn’t die in the Lion’s Judgment like I was meant to, she made use of a court lady with a grudge to torment and kill me. Though *that* didn’t work out too well for her either.” Putting a hand to her cheek, Reirin cast a wry smile Leelee’s way and added, “After all, such harmless pranks couldn’t hope to kill a baby kitten.”

Leelee returned that comment with a stiff smile, neither affirming nor denying it. The real Shu Keigetsu likely would have died a dog’s death the moment she was exiled to the storehouse, and even the slightest bit of harassment would have taken a toll on her mental health. In fact, that would have been the case for most people, and *Reirin* was the strange one for taking it all in her perky stride.

Shouldn’t a butterfly be a metaphor for a more, I dunno...delicate and refined sort of existence? Leelee thought, her eyes glazing over as she stared at the girl so brimming with vitality.

Even the original Shu Keigetsu, who was supposed to be the very definition of arrogance, was unusually docile—perhaps a side effect of being stuck in Reirin’s body—and gaped at the Maiden beside her like she had sprouted a second head.

“That explains why you dug up the venomcraft jar, at least,” said Leelee. As she gradually processed all this new information, she was struck with the horror of the situation anew.

So that ivory silk was the Noble Consort all along... She was the one who instigated this switch, tried to hurt Lady Reirin, worked to forsake Shu Keigetsu—everything. I can’t believe she was the one pulling the strings behind

everything that's happened.

The thought that the head of her own clan was out to commit the ultimate crime of regicide was enough to send a shiver down her spine. Reirin being Reirin, she spoke about it as if it were no big deal, but Consort Shu had made persistent attempts on her life. Given the depths of her crimes, it would be no surprise if total extinction loomed in the Shu clan's future.

"What was the Noble Consort thinking...?" muttered Leelee, the color draining from her face.

"I'm sorry, Leelee, but I'm afraid there's no time to be wallowing in shock," Reirin asserted calmly but firmly. "We don't have a second to lose bringing our counter-venomcraft to completion and saving the empress's life."

"Y-you're right..." That managed to bring Leelee back to her senses, but as something else occurred to her, she lifted her head. "Hold on a second. Didn't you two run into His Highness before coming here?"

Reirin blinked, lashes fluttering. "Hm? Why do you ask?"

Growing more anxious, Leelee replied, "He came by the Palace of the Golden Qilin not long after you jumped the wall. Despite the seal posted outside, he kept banging on the doors of the gate and demanding someone open it." After a short pause, she found her resolve and added, "I heard him shout, 'Wait, Reirin!' He seemed convinced that Lady 'Kou Reirin' wasn't the one dwelling in the palace but the one who had just forced her way inside."

Reirin and Keigetsu gulped and exchanged glances.

"That means..."

"W-we're busted! His Highness knows!"

"That can't be. I was certain he hadn't figured it out last I saw him..." Reirin's brow furrowed in confusion.

Leelee hung her head, ashamed. "His attendants were begging him to stop, and the Kou Palace was hardly in a state to accept visitors, so it's possible His Highness was never allowed inside. I figured someone ought to be around to handle the cover-up in case he returned, so I came back without waiting to see

what happened. I'm sorry."

"You've done plenty, Leelee. Please lift your head. There's nothing for you to feel bad about," Reirin told her in a tone that left no room for argument.

Distressed, she placed a hand to her cheek again. She wasn't sure what had tipped him off, but one way or another, Gyoumei had learned of the switch. Here Reirin thought they'd made it this far without incident, but in truth, it seemed forcing her way over the wall and dragging Keigetsu out of the Kou Palace soon after had merely allowed them to dodge the prince's pursuit by the skin of their teeth.

Just as Leelee had suggested, there was a chance he would double back to the storehouse as soon as he found Reirin's room empty. Thinking about how livid he was going to be was enough to make even Reirin, the would-be victim in the scenario, feel a sense of dread.

"Lady Keigetsu... Perhaps we ought to reverse the switch first thing, after all," she ventured after a long silence.

Keigetsu clenched her fists, conflicted. "No. I'm not doing that," she eventually replied, her voice tight.

Hearing that, the one to speak up was not Reirin but Leelee. "Get your damn act together. What do you mean, 'no'? You think you're in any position to say that?!"

It was at this point that the resentment she'd long built toward the real Shu Keigetsu exploded forth in a single burst. She scowled and berated her former mistress, abandoning even her half-hearted attempts at decorum.

"I don't give a damn if your dull sewer-rat self got suckered into it or not—you still got way ahead of yourself trying to trade places with the prince's butterfly! What the hell were you even thinking? Let me be clear: You have zero right to be playing the victim here. If you hadn't gone ahead with the idea, the Noble Consort's whole plot would have ended as an insane pipe dream."

"Oh, shut up! I don't want to hear this from some low-ranking court lady!"

"I hate to break it to you, but I'm a blazing scarlet now. Sure, I've caused Lady Reirin a decent bit of trouble myself, but at least I turned over a new leaf and

have been giving my all to serve her ever since. And how about you, huh? Can't even manage the tiniest amount of human compassion for the person who saved your life? The least you could do is undo the goddamn switch already and try to make up for all the problems—"

"Enough!" Keigetsu interrupted her, silencing her with an even louder shout. "I know that!"

"Scuse me?"

"Even I have the guts to take responsibility for my own mess! That's *why* I'm saying I won't undo the switch!"

The unexpected comeback shut Leelee up, her eyes going wide.

"What do you mean?" Reirin asked in her attendant's stead.

Keigetsu averted her gaze. "Reversing the switch and forming a venomcraft takes a huge amount of qi. I can't do both in the same day. If I use my qi to put our souls back, I won't have enough left to activate the venomcraft. So I won't do it."

In other words, she was prioritizing bringing the venomcraft to completion over undoing the switch—which meant putting Reirin's fight over saving her own skin.

"Don't get the wrong idea!" Keigetsu shouted when Reirin leaned forward in surprise, cutting her off before she could say anything. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm here to teach the person who took me for a fool a lesson!"

"What? But you just said this was about taking responsibility for—"

"No! Shut up! I was talking about, uh...you know...righting the wrongs of the Shu consort as a fellow member of her clan!"

She went on rambling that putting the empress in her debt could see her sentence reduced post-switch, and that this was about her pride as a Daoist cultivator, but given that she kept tripping over her words, it was hard to say how much of it was her true feelings.

While Leelee was taken aback, Reirin broke out into a warm smile. "Say, Leelee. Lady Keigetsu really *is* quite adorable, isn't she?"

“Uh... I don’t know about that one...” She wasn’t sure how else to respond.

Moving along: Now that they had settled on going ahead with the venomcraft first, the girls jumped straight into the preparations. There was no telling when Gyomei might show up mad with rage, after all.

Leelee stood at the edge of the yard to keep watch, while Reirin and Keigetsu fetched a dagger and ink from within the storehouse and sat down beside the door. According to Keigetsu, the steps to put a curse into motion were to define the target, focus one’s qi and imbue the venomcraft with prayer, and, for the finishing touch, offer a sacrifice.

“First, you define the target you want to curse on the spiritual object—the oil jar, in our case. You have to use ink mixed with blood and describe the person in as much detail as possible. The more specific you get, the more qi it’ll demand, so I’ll bet *she* only wrote, say, ‘Noble Kou: a noblewoman of the Kou Palace.’ But if it were me, I’d write something like *this*.”

Keigetsu applied a mixture of Reirin’s—or rather, “Shu Keigetsu’s” blood and the ink of the smut rice to her fingernails, then inscribed the following on the centipede-filled jar:

Kou-Devouring Spider: the spider that consumes a noblewoman of the Kou Palace.

She targeted not the Noble Consort herself but the spider at her command.

“This way, it’ll be constrained to one particular target, allowing the curse to grow in power as it concentrates on a single point.”

Reirin nodded along. “Plus, it’s easier on the conscience to target the curse itself than to curse another person.”

“Well, the curse reflects back onto the caster when it’s broken, so it all amounts to the same thing in the end,” Keigetsu said with a dismissive shrug.

Heedless of how Reirin lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, the words to the incantation began to flow from Keigetsu’s tongue. “By the principles of the Cosmos founded at the dawn of time, heed my words...”

Reirin listened intently from where she crouched beside her, helping to hold

up the jar. Keigetsu had never seemed like much of a poet, but her recitation of the curse had a mysterious lilt to it, lending the words a dark sort of beauty. It sounded like the gist of the chant was praise to the principle of yin and yang, while requesting a little extra helping of yin qi on the side. As she repeated a few phrases here and there, Keigetsu defined the target, described the spectacle of a centipede devouring a spider, and worked to bring the incantation to completion.

At the very end, she murmured, “Know what I have said and do as the law demands.” As if in response to her voice, the letters written in blood ink caught fire and melted away into flame.

“Incredible...” Reirin remarked with a gulp.

“Now all that’s left is the sacrifice—killing this centipede here.” Keigetsu lifted the lid of the oil jar. “Killing the sacrifice brings the spell to completion, and the grudge of the slain converts it into yin energy. But...eep!”

When she heard the scuttle of the creature’s legs, Keigetsu nearly dropped the whole container.

“Th-this centipede is poisonous on its own... Not to mention... Oh, gosh, talk about grotesque!”

“Do you want me to handle this part, Lady Keigetsu?” Reirin hesitantly offered, loath to stand by and watch as Keigetsu struggled with her apparent dislike of bugs. She reached for the hilt of the dagger she had taken from the storehouse—the same one Leelee had gotten from the ivory silk once upon a time—only for Keigetsu to snatch it away with a click of her tongue.

“I’ll do it! I’m not about to leave this to the girl who everyone says wouldn’t kill an insect.”

“No, believe it or not, I’m actually quite—”

“Sit back and watch, amateur.”

Reirin persisted, but Keigetsu wouldn’t give her the time of day. For a while, Reirin stared at the other girl as she clutched the dagger like a talisman, her face taut with tension.

“Lady Keigetsu.”

“What? Be quiet.” Setting her jaw, Keigetsu reached to lift the lid back up with trembling fingers.

Reirin gently took that quivering hand in both of her own. “Now, this is only a guess...but could it be that you plan to shoulder the curse and die all on your own?”

Keigetsu whipped around, startled.

Reirin looked back at her with a penetrating gaze. “You said earlier that the curse bounces back to the caster when it’s broken. Killing the sacrifice brings the spell to completion... In other words, the one who does the deed is the one defined as the ‘caster,’ correct? Then on the off chance this spell fails, won’t *you* become its victim as the one who killed the sacrifice?”

“...”

“Please be honest with me, Lady Keigetsu. Is the caster defined by the body? Or the soul? If you kill the sacrifice in my form, which of us will be held responsible?”

The pair stared at one another in silence for several long breaths.

Eventually, Keigetsu let slip a short sigh of resignation. “You act like an airhead, but you can be weirdly perceptive sometimes.”

“That’s not an answer, Lady Keigetsu. Which is it?”

A pause. “The soul. Qi is a product of the soul, after all. If I kill the centipede, the curse will come back to hit me when it fails. That goes for whether I’m in your body at the time or not.”

In short, Keigetsu was willing to risk her own life in order to save the empress.

Reirin opened her mouth to ask why, only to have Keigetsu cut her off as she stared down at the jar. “I don’t know any other way.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know any other way I can apologize to you. I don’t know any other way I can make things right. And...I don’t know any other way to live up to your

expectations.”

Keigetsu drew her lips into a thin line, then whirled on Reirin. Though her eyes were narrowed into a glare, she was the picture of a helpless child.

“Nobody’s ever given me a chance. Nobody’s ever said they were proud of me. Nobody’s ever expected anything from me. So I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I’m not sure...but I still want to do *something*!” she snapped. “You called me a star! Just this once...no matter how small a gesture it might be, even a mud-dweller like me wanted to do something brilliant enough to make someone proud! Got a problem with that?!”

Though her voice bordered on a shriek, it had a strangely pleasant ring to it.

“Lady Keigetsu,” Reirin murmured after a long stretch of silence. “The power of a comet is an incredible thing.”

“Huh?”

“You see...”

The girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face cast a glance skyward, her gaze soft with nostalgia. At the moment, it was a clear, blue summer sky. Nine days ago, it had been dotted with shining white stars.

“I told you that I made two wishes on the comet, didn’t I? One was for better health. As for the other...” In a voice soft enough to melt into the very air around them, she whispered, “I wanted a friend.”

When Keigetsu lapsed into shocked silence, Reirin giggled and went on, “Believe it or not, I’ve always known that I grew up in a fairly privileged environment.”

Born a daughter of the prestigious Kou clan, she had been nurtured to an almost excessive degree by not only the obliging court ladies but even her aunt the empress and her cousin the crown prince. She had a weak constitution, but all that did was make everyone around her put her needs first. Whatever she did would be praised or pardoned. Everything was handed to her before she could even ask for it. Around her were nothing but adults who looked gently down upon her or servants who gazed up at her in dazzled fascination. It was a world as warm and soft as a cradle.

“But when it comes down to it, I too am a Kou. I don’t want to be carried around with care; I want to feel the ground beneath my feet as I walk. I wanted someone I could pamper instead of be pampered *by*.”

Reirin knew she was lauded as the prince’s butterfly. The title felt to her like a terrible overstatement, and it had been embarrassing to think that Gyomei cherished her to such an extent, but even more than that, she had found it frustrating.

She wasn’t a butterfly. She wasn’t a far-off existence to be admired from the ground below.

If anything...I wanted to be the earth.

As the thought crossed her mind, Reirin reached out to touch the soil. The earth was warm and bathed in sunlight. The rich, moist soil felt soft to the touch, but it was firm enough to make her heart swell with emotion. It was a constant of life, steady and unmoving. No one ever spared it a second glance as they trampled it underfoot, but that soil would support the lives of all who stood upon it.

Reirin wanted to love someone like that. She wanted to nurture and pamper them. Her true desire wasn’t to be carefully sheltered from harm but to stand and protect someone else. At the very least, she wanted to be their equal.

Just like those glorious days I spent in the storehouse.

In the blink of an eye, fragments of those vivid days played back in her mind one after another: Those sharp emotions directed at her without reserve. The first time she’d ever cooked for herself. Indulging in her hobbies without anyone to stop her. Feeling anger for someone else’s sake. A smile that came from the bottom of her heart, not to fool someone about her health.

If she told her that this was the first time she had ever been the subject of someone else’s glare, scrambled so hard for another person, or lost control of her emotions, what kind of face would the girl sitting before her make?

“I’ve always wanted to have someone whom I can support. A friend who will treat me like an equal. Someone willing to scold me and vent feelings to me that are more than just tender.”

Reirin looked Keigetsu straight in the eye. Despite it being on Shu Keigetsu's face, that reserved but dignified smile managed to look so very much like her own.

"Lady Keigetsu. You were the first person to ever come at me with such raw emotion. You are a genuine sort of person—one whose heart is easily moved, who feels emotion with more intensity than you can bear, and who would offer up your life in the middle of an apology to the girl you hate. You have all the things I don't."

The perfect picture of a butterfly, her lips curved into a smile so enchanting as to capture a person's heart and never let it go.

"Would you like to become my friend?" she asked.

"Wha..."

"Mind you, I don't plan to take no for an answer."

"Huh?!"

As the other girl's eyes darted around in a panic, Reirin wrapped her hand around the one in which Keigetsu gripped the dagger.

"If we're going to swing down the blade, we do it together. Let's split our curse down the middle, shall we?" Impishly, she added, "Since we're friends, after all."

Keigetsu gaped at her like a fish out of water. "Wh...Why, you...!"

"Yes?"

Leelee shot them a glance from a short distance away. Her gaze didn't betray concern so much as the exasperated sentiment of, *You're back to seducing anything that moves, huh?*

Eventually snapping back to her senses, Keigetsu scrambled to put more strength into her grip on the dagger.

"Stop right there!"

A voice rang out from past the garden and behind the border with the Shu Palace, causing all three girls to turn their heads at once.

“Just what do you think you’re doing without my permission, Keigetsu?”

The low, menacing voice belonged to a woman clad in the most noble vermillion in all of the palace. It was the consort whose drooping eyes and snow-white skin gave her a gentle air: Noble Consort Shu.

Leelee, the one who was standing closest to her, went rigid with alarm. “Noble Consort!”

Casting a glance toward the court lady as she drew back into a defensive stance, Consort Shu coldly spat, “My, aren’t you getting haughty for the lowly daughter of a foreigner?”

Placid, reserved, tranquil—there was not a trace to be found of the air she was known for. Her words were accented with a disdain that no amount of white powder could conceal, and her tone of voice was identical to the ivory silk who had once shoved Leelee away and called her a rat.

“Someone... Help!” Leelee was quick to turn around and shout in the direction of the main Shu Palace despite her panic. “Eagle Eyes! What are the other court ladies *doing*?!”

“It’s no use.” A small smile rose to the Noble Consort’s face. “This is Her Majesty’s—that accursed woman’s—hour of need. The Eagle Eyes are busy keeping watch on the Palace of the Golden Qilin, and the women are all holed up deep in their own palaces for fear of calamity. No one is going to come here.”

That sinister way she punctuated each word like a curse sent a chill down Leelee’s spine. Consort Shu took advantage of the opening to breeze straight past her. Or, no—her gait was a touch awkward. One hand clutched to her chest, she dragged her right leg ever so slightly behind her as she walked.

“Her heart and her right foot... Hey, did you ever manage to hit the target with the Bow of Warding?” Keigetsu asked, her voice cracking.

“Yes. I hit the center once, and the right edge a handful of times,” Reirin replied, quick to pick up on what she was getting at.

The pair exchanged silent glances, their lips drawn into tight lines. It really *had* been Noble Consort Shu.

“D-do you have any idea what the hell you’ve done?!” Leelee shouted, coming back to her senses. Her straightforward personality and strong sense of loyalty made the consort’s misdeeds a bitter pill for her to swallow. Shaking her head and discarding all semblance of decorum, she continued to yell. “Why would you dabble with curses?! Why would the second most exalted woman in the inner court think to do something so heinous?!”

Not content to rebuke her with words alone, Leelee reached out to grab Consort Shu by the shoulder.

“No, Leelee!” Reirin shouted, snapping to attention. “Watch out!”

As Reirin continued calling out to her, she sprang to her feet and rushed toward Leelee. A moment after she had shoved the redhead aside with all her might, a blade cut through the space where she had just been with a sharp *whoosh*. Noble Consort Shu had swung down a dagger she’d pulled from her breast.

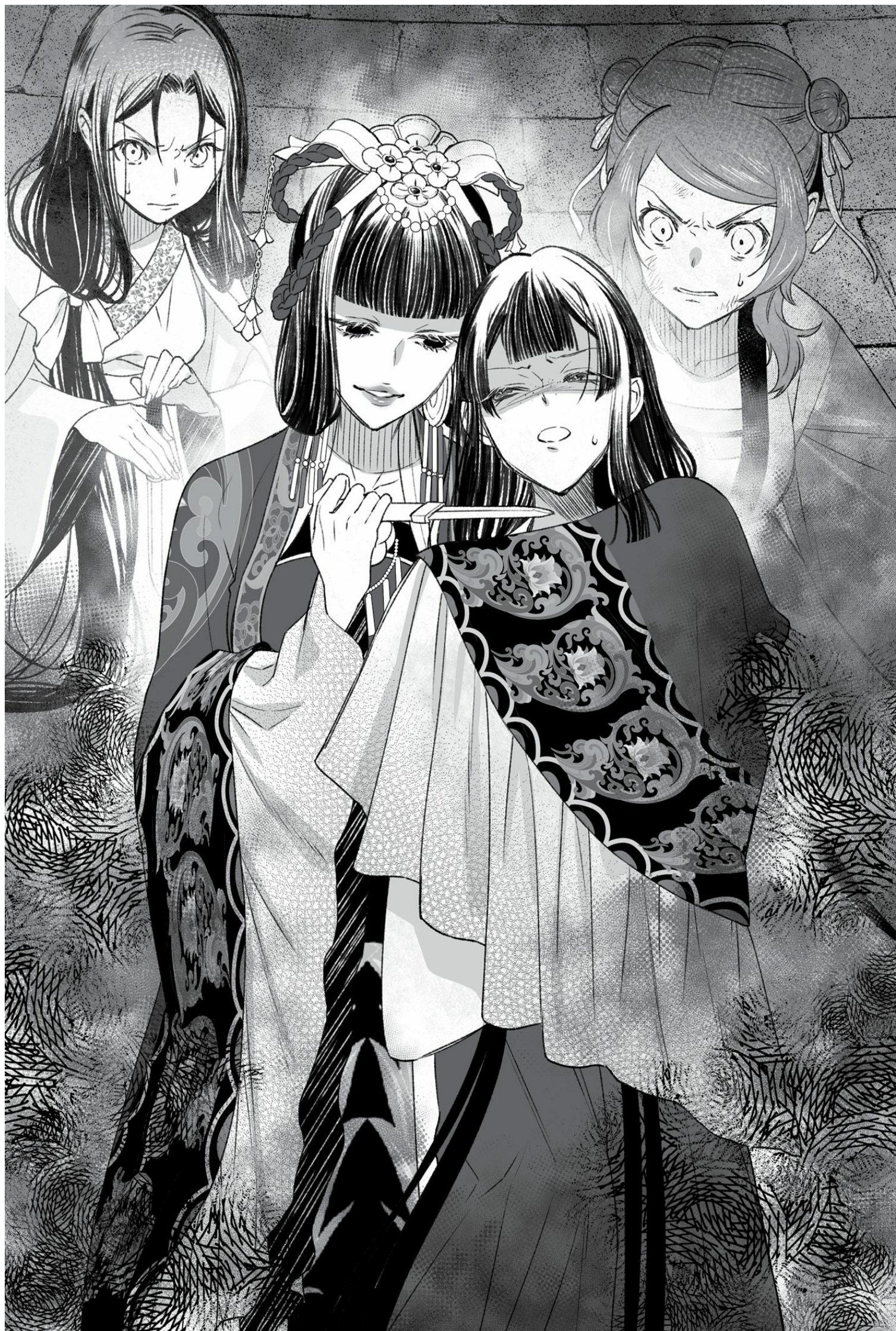
“Be careful, Leelee! You mustn’t provoke an armed—”

The relief Reirin felt upon pushing Leelee from the path of the assassin’s blade was short-lived; she was soon forced to choke on a scream of her own. Exploiting the opening created by her concern for Leelee, the Noble Consort grabbed her by the hair and dragged her close. Yanking Reirin’s head back, the consort thrust the gleaming tip of the blade against her exposed throat.

“Lady Reirin!”

“Kou Reirin!”

Both Leelee and Keigetsu couldn’t help but call her name.



Consort Shu gave a soft chuckle. “My, my. The truth has spread quite far in a matter of ten days, hasn’t it, Keigetsu? Perhaps imitating a butterfly was too much to ask of a little sewer rat. I expected this, but still...what a useless girl you turned out to be.”

Her eyes, narrowed in mockery, were not focused on the girl she held at knifepoint but at Keigetsu—the girl wearing Kou Reirin’s face. It seemed that Consort Shu had indeed grasped the full picture, switch and all.

In a desperate bid to keep the venom spewed in that mild tone from eating at her, Keigetsu lit a fire under herself. “It may have taken me a while, but I’ve finally caught on to your foolish designs, Noble Consort. And now I’m poised to crush them once and for all. If you value your life, I suggest you set down your blade.”

“You have it backward. *You* put *your* blade down, Keigetsu.” Noble Consort Shu dug the tip of her dagger into Reirin’s skin. “You haven’t completed your counter-venomcraft, have you? You wasted too much time prattling on about friendship and sharing the dagger. If you value the life of your first and only ‘friend’...and your *own* life too, you’ll put down the jar and the dagger both.”

Blood beaded on Reirin’s torn skin. It was plain to see that the consort could plunge that dagger into her throat long before Keigetsu managed to stab the centipede squirming around in the jar.

“Please...” Leelee raised a trembling voice before the captive Reirin could. “Please put the blade down, Lady Keigetsu.”

“No,” a dignified voice immediately cut in. “Don’t worry about me. Do what—ngh!”

Reirin’s attempts to be brave were cut off when the consort gave her hair an even harder tug and slid the blade across her throat, forcing her to shut her mouth to stifle her moan.

“What a noisy little butterfly.”

Keigetsu pressed her lips together. “...”

Noble Consort Shu gazed upon the Maiden glaring at her with a dagger

gripped tight in her hand much like one might look at a stubborn child. Her face wore a strained smile of exasperation—and scorn. “My, what a goody-goody you’ve become. Are you really that desperate to save the empress from death? Did you always have such a strong sense of justice? Whatever could be driving you to do this?” She schooled her voice into a slow drawl, but the ends of her sentences were marked with clear irritation.

No doubt she was considering how best to shake up the girl standing there holding the jar. At last, the Noble Consort fixed her face into a look of gentle concern, softened the look in her drooping eyes, and said, “Oh, Keigetsu, you poor thing! I can see you’ve lost your bearings. It’s all right, my precious Maiden.”

Chances were that she was used to faking her tone that way. Keigetsu could feel that graceful voice and reserved inflection seeping gently into her ears.

“If you reflect the venomcraft onto me, I’ll certainly die. You’ll be responsible for the murder of your own surrogate mother. What’s more, you won’t go unpunished as a member of the clan who conspired to treason. Word of the switch has already gotten around, after all. In the end, you’ll have no choice but to go back to being Shu Keigetsu—the same wretched sewer rat as before.”

When Keigetsu bit down on her lip, Consort Shu carried on, her smile the only gentle thing about her. “No, worse—you’ll be charged with the additional crime of switching bodies with Kou Reirin. No doubt your punishment will be a grueling one. No one is going to offer you a helping hand knowing the true depths of your ratty nature. Doesn’t that sound awful? Now let’s consider the alternative.”

She gave a small, beguiling tilt of her head. “What happens if you put down the dagger? I’ll take you back with open arms. No, as the new empress, I can promise you better treatment than ever before. Or if you’ve taken a liking to that body, I’ll even allow you to remain as Kou Reirin. I vow to keep your secret safe. Why, I wouldn’t even mind letting Kou Reirin’s soul live on in your original vessel, the one I’m holding at knifepoint right now. So long as you make sure to rob her of her words or her memory, that is.”

After delivering that oh-so-magnanimous speech, Consort Shu made a

deliberate show of sliding the tip of her blade along Reirin's throat again. Keigetsu's face froze in fear as she watched the blood drip to the ground. "Stop..."

"Be quick about it, Keigetsu. This dagger is so heavy that my hand might just slip," the consort purred in threat.

That was the last straw for Keigetsu. Dropping to her knees, she placed the jar and dagger on the ground.

"There, that's it. You don't have to think about anything. Hee hee! You never *have* had much in the way of smarts. Now, lift the lid," commanded Consort Shu, her gaze narrowed.

"Don't do it, Lady Keige—"

"Quiet," said the consort.

Ignoring Reirin's efforts to stop her, Keigetsu lifted the lid with trembling hands. Before long, the centipede had wriggled its way out of the jar and crawled off into the wilderness.

Keigetsu watched it disappear into the garden grass in a daze. It was a huge, venomous centipede. But to her, that had been the first and last vestiges of her conscience and pride.

"Ha ha ha ha! There's a good girl, Keigetsu. Yes, that's all you've ever been—an incompetent, cowardly, miserable sewer rat!" Noble Consort Shu guffawed as Keigetsu slumped over on the spot. "But that's all you need to be. I alone will continue to offer you protection. Be a good little girl in the palm of my hand—"

"Take that!"

The consort's triumphant laughter was cut short. With a cry so dainty as to feel inappropriate for the situation, Reirin—the girl who was supposed to have been paralyzed by the blade at her throat—stomped down hard on the ground, crushing something underfoot. The motion nearly pushed the blade into her neck, but she swiftly turned her chin aside to avoid it.

"Got you!"

Not content to stop there, she delivered a swift elbow strike to the Noble

Consort's solar plexus. It was an oddly practiced motion, both hands folded together to stabilize the trajectory of the attack.

"Ggh?!"

Unable to withstand the impact, Noble Consort Shu crumpled on the spot. Next, Reirin landed a sharp kick to her hand, which sent the dagger in her grip flying. Once she'd watched it land somewhere far in the distance, Reirin bent down to pick up the remnants of what she'd just crushed. She ran her gaze over the object sitting in her palm, nodded to herself, and then looked back at Keigetsu with a beaming smile.

"I did it!"

"Huh?!"

Just how many of those present understood exactly what had happened?

As everyone else gaped at her, the Noble Consort included, Reirin gave a mildly embarrassed tilt of her head before saying "See?" and holding up her spoils before the crowd.

"I'm sorry, Lady Keigetsu. I ended up finishing the job myself."

"Wh—"

Dangling from between her fingers was the squashed corpse of a centipede.

Uncertain how the speechless Keigetsu had taken this turn of events, Reirin's face fell in discomfiture. "Yes, I know... After that whole speech I gave, it wasn't very fair of me to do it alone. It's still twitching, so if it'd make you happier, there's still time to tear off a piece of your own..."

"No thank you! Don't come any closer!" Keigetsu yelled as Reirin sheepishly thrust the centipede right under her nose. How else was she supposed to react in that scenario?

While the other three women looked on, stunned, Reirin let the centipede's remains fall to the ground with a *plop*, then put a hand to her cheek and began making excuses. "I apologize for charging ahead on my own in the same breath that I invited you to hold the dagger with me. But what was I to do? Mr. Centipede was right underfoot."

“Still! Most people couldn’t stamp on a centipede without hesitation—not to mention hit it dead-on!”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m good at dealing with bugs.”

For Reirin’s part, she wouldn’t have minded killing the centipede with her bare hands, and having a dagger thrust before her neck merited neither panic nor a change in her plans. After all, it was more than possible for her to find an opening and fight back using the self-defense techniques Tousetsu had taught her.

“With how caught up she was in talking, Consort Shu left her torso wide open. I simply couldn’t resist...”

Her face twitching throughout Reirin’s explanation of her counterattack, Keigetsu opened her mouth to shoot something back.

“Eek!”

But before she could, the shrill shriek of the Noble Consort made her turn around. A glance in her direction showed her still planted on her backside, staring ashen-faced at the sky like she saw something floating there.

“D-don’t come any closer...” She flung her arms around wildly as if to chase off some invisible creature.

“I see the venomcraft came back to haunt her,” Keigetsu murmured with a frown, as though she could see it happening. The tone of her voice alone was enough to inspire dread.

“Stay away! Stay awaaaay! *No!*”

It wasn’t long before Consort Shu tried to crawl away in escape, dragging her injured right leg along with her. As she flailed her arms, one hand happened to land upon the dagger that had been kicked away. Picking it up with a bloodcurdling look on her face, she slashed at the air.

“Get away from me! Go devour that accursed empress! The woman who stole my son from me! Damn you!”

Was it the fear or the hatred that consumed her? As she continued to brandish her dagger, all semblance of sanity lost, her bloodshot eyes caught a

glimpse of Reirin—the girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face.

“You useless brat...”

Dripping with rancor, the words were almost certainly meant for the real Shu Keigetsu. It was evident that even the fact of the switch had slipped her mind and that this was a purely instinctive reaction to the sight of the girl’s face.

“I made you my Maiden! I raised a good-for-nothing like you in the place of my son who would have been born to shine! And your thanks is not only to stop me from killing the empress but to curse me back?!” she screamed almost hard enough to spit up blood, then took a full swing at Reirin with her dagger. “You damned *sewer rat!*”

Clang!

A dull sound echoed through the air. It wasn’t the tear of her blade piercing flesh but the sound of Noble Consort Shu being forced back, weapon and all. In the same instant, Reirin blinked in the realization that someone had pulled her into a tight embrace to shield her from the deadly blade.

“Are you all right?!” asked Captain Shin-u, the one who had pinned the Noble Consort to the ground.

“Did she hurt you, Reirin?!” said Prince Gyoumei, the one hugging her with enough force to be suffocating.

“Dea—Your Highness!”

Just as Reirin was about to ask what they were doing here, the words died on her tongue. How much point had there been to changing “dearest cousin” to “Your Highness” at the last second? After all...

He just called me “Reirin,” didn’t he...?

She gulped quietly. This was a grave enough crisis to make Noble Consort Shu’s attack look like a walk in the park. To dodge a blade led astray by hatred was simple, but the strong arms of a man who had forgotten himself in his love and righteousness weren’t so easily shaken off. Reirin thought to divert his attention with the major incident that was the Noble Consort’s murder plot, but someone else beat her to the punch.

“Shu Gabi,” said Shin-u. “Both His Highness and I overheard you confess to your attempted assassination of the empress, as well as the Maiden’s thwarting of your plot. Shall I assume this to be a misplaced grudge over your stillborn son? Brace yourself—I’ve got a lot of questions for you.”

Oh dear...

The speed with which the competent captain had not only apprehended the culprit but even begun to unravel the truth was enough to make Reirin dizzy.

“Are you all right, Reirin? You *are* Reirin, right? Yes?” Gyoumei asked with an air of urgency. He examined the wound on her neck before putting a hand to her cheek and lifting her face to look at him. The fact that he was ignoring Consort Shu’s disturbed ravings to focus on his heart-to-heart with Reirin showed just how frantic he was.

Chances were that he was plagued with intense guilt over the fact that he had not only failed to notice his beloved cousin had traded places with another woman but sentenced her to death by beast and insulted her on more than one occasion.

“It seems so obvious when I look at you now... Oh, how could I not have noticed that you’d been replaced?!”

“Wh-whatever are you talking about? I’m—”

Perhaps because she wasn’t addressing Keigetsu directly, the words “I’m Shu Keigetsu” vanished in her throat without ever forming sound. Gyoumei’s eyes narrowed more balefully than ever when she opened and closed her mouth, sending Reirin into a cold sweat.

I-Is this going to be Tousetsu’s raging storm of penitence all over again?

The desperation filling his virile features and the way he clung to her with his gaze gave her flashbacks to Tousetsu’s apology the other night.

It was all well and good to have a strong sense of responsibility, but given that Reirin hadn’t suffered any real damage as a result of the switch, their overdramatic apologies and lamentations put her in an awkward spot. Seeing them so bent out of shape made her feel like she was picking on them, and the distressed looks on their faces tickled her protective instincts. Reirin didn’t

realize it herself, but the women of the Kou clan's main line tended to have an unfortunate weakness for useless men.

Her gaze shifted around as she wondered what to do. Leelee wore a look of total resignation on her face. The captain of the Eagle Eyes didn't seem surprised about the reveal—if anything, he was staring her down like prey he refused to let escape. Meanwhile, Keigetsu was gawking up at the sky with a pale face.

Why the sky?

Upon following her gaze up to the heavens, it was Reirin's turn to be surprised. The blue skies of just moments ago had been obscured by storm clouds rolling in at a tremendous pace.

Huh?

At first, she wondered if it might be an effect of the venomcraft, but that didn't seem to be the case. The sinister clouds had gathered not around the consort in Shin-u's custody but in the sky right above Gyoumei's head.

"Please, Reirin. Look at me. Say something. Or...can you not find it in your heart to forgive me?"

The dark clouds grew thicker and thicker in proportion to the strength of Gyoumei's grip on her shoulders. When lightning began to streak the sky here and there, she heard Keigetsu's quivering voice from behind her: "For such tremendous dragon's qi to be thrown into such chaos... This can't be happening..."

Evidently, Gyoumei's emotional turmoil had thrown his dragon's qi into equal disarray, manifesting as the turbulence in the skies above.

Wow... I didn't know my dear cousin could do that.

It was said that long ago, the Great Ancestor could command the weather with his powerful dragon's qi. Given that none of the recent generations of the imperial family had possessed as strong an aura, however, Reirin had assumed that such abilities were no more than a thing of legend. Who would have guessed the day would come when she'd bear witness to the phenomenon firsthand?

Since lightning was said to be a portent of a good harvest, wielding his ability in the rural areas was bound to delight the villagers. Reirin's surprise was mild enough to be entertaining such idle thoughts—and in stark contrast, Keigetsu was shaking like a leaf, her hands clamped over her mouth. Apparently, this was a hair-raising spectacle in her eyes.

Thinking how hard it must be to have the power to sense the dragon's qi made Reirin's heart go out to the girl. But upon seeing that Leelee had slumped to the ground in fear and even Shin-u was struck breathless by the sight, she realized that the difference in their reactions might have had little to do with who was or wasn't in tune with the Daoist arts. Rather, it was a sign of how much her own survival instincts had been numbed. Reirin may have had the sensitivity to string together beautiful verses, but her perceptions appeared to be on the dull side when it came to fear or caution in particular.

"Reirin... Say something, please!"

When a bolt of lightning flashed and thunder crashed from a storm cloud above, Keigetsu let slip a frightened squeak. Her voice cracking, she yelled, "C'mon, p-please! Just say something—*anything*! I went ahead and broke the silencing spell, so do something to calm His Highness down already!"

"Huh?"

What was *she* supposed to do? It wasn't like they had rehearsed this.

This task of the utmost urgency dropped into her lap, Reirin made a faltering attempt to distract the prince. "Erm... Aren't there more important things to be worrying about right now? For instance, Noble Consort Shu's plot to—"

"I can infer what happened from her own cries. She cast a curse that gave rise to my mother's illness, and you put a stop to it by reflecting the curse back onto her. I've grasped the gist of what happened, and Shin-u has apprehended the culprit. In which case, my conversation with you takes priority."

Reirin was staggered by how quick her cousin was on the uptake.

"Th-then what about Her Majesty? Your mother suffers as we speak, Your Highness! Time spent absorbed in conversation with me would be better spent hurrying back to the Palace of the Golden Qilin at once. The curse may have

been lifted, but I'm still worried for her. You ought to rush to her side this very instant!"

"You think that mother of mine would *want* me to rush to her sickbed? If I showed up to see her before I'd even managed an apology to you, she would be absolutely furious with me," he matter-of-factly replied.

Reirin's mind was screaming, *He's got a point!* It seemed Gyoumei understood his mother's nature even better than Reirin did.

"Furthermore, last I saw the Kou Palace, Tousetsu had taken the reins and put a solid nursing system in place. Now that the curse has been lifted, she wouldn't do anything so shameful as to leave my mother's life to chance."

"True... Knowing Tousetsu is in charge certainly puts the mind at ease... Yes, sir..."

"Once Tousetsu made up her mind to talk, she rattled off the whole story from start to finish. She told me everything—from how Shu Keigetsu switched your bodies out of jealousy, to how you're still trying to protect her in spite of that."

Tousetsu...!

Reirin almost caught herself glancing heavenward. It seemed Tousetsu hadn't gotten over her anger toward Keigetsu in the least.

You're in for a lecture later!

"She seemed to deeply regret not catching on to the switch sooner. She proclaimed through her tears that as soon as Mother's condition stabilized, her only recourse would be to cut off a finger or to tattoo herself to make amends. I understand the feeling all too well."

"..."

Reirin was feeling concerned all of a sudden. Perhaps a therapy session would have to come before that lecture.

"Yes, I know *exactly* what she's feeling. My heart is ready to burst from all the guilt, and I can hardly breathe for my desperation to vent these raging emotions."

Gyoumei brushed his fingers over Reirin's neck. He touched the spot where Consort Shu had cut her, which still faintly oozed blood.

"I've...made an irreparable mistake." He scooped a drop of blood onto the tip of his finger, then furrowed his brow into a pained expression. "I hurt you."

The finger coated with blood was trembling ever so slightly.

Oh, now I see...

Reirin had an epiphany. Anger wasn't the emotion that had rattled his dragon's qi to this extent. It was sadness.

Gyoumei was trying to take all the responsibility upon himself. His guilt over failing to see who she was and sentencing her to death went without saying, but he blamed himself for even the meager hostility she'd met throughout her several days' stay in the storehouse, the conspiracy she'd found herself dragged into, the wounds she'd sustained from repeatedly drawing a bow of her own free will, the cut Consort Shu had given her when her guard was down—everything.

His deep sadness and guilt almost seemed to flow into her during that fleeting moment when he touched her skin. Thinking about it that way, the darkness blanketing the sky no longer looked like a symbol of fierce anger—it was like tear clouds spun from the sobs he struggled to hold back.

"What should I do? How do I apologize? No matter how many years I spend on my knees, no matter how many of this land's treasures I present to you, nothing will ever erase the sin of trying to take your life. Must I rend the Maiden who caused all this and the consort who hurt you asunder?!"

"No!" came Reirin's panicked shout when a bolt of lightning streaked across the sky. Poor Keigetsu was too intimidated to even move a muscle.

A beat later, there came a roar of thunder. Reirin cupped Gyoumei's face in her hands, covering his ears, and pulled him toward her.

"Please calm down, Your Highness," she said gently. Relieved to see that his pale-colored eyes had registered her in their sights, Reirin gazed unflinchingly back into his face.

What a kind man.

Gyoumei was kind. Determined to protect Reirin from anything and everything, he endeavored to keep her carefully tucked away in the palm of his hand, where he could shield her from so much as a scratch. At the same time, part of him worried that he might crush her between his own fingers in the process.

The prince held absolute authority over the Maiden Court. He could punish any Maiden who incurred his displeasure, and no one would fault him if he pushed all the blame onto Keigetsu and punished her at his own discretion. The reason he didn't do that lay in his strong sense of responsibility, along with a reluctance to abuse his authority to bring about a conclusion Reirin wouldn't want.

"You're our wise prince. I know it isn't your intent to throw this land into chaos. Look around—everyone here is terrified, down to the trees and blades of grass around us. Even I might grow frightened if your qi continues its rampage."

"..."

Her last sentence eased the tension in the air around him. The dark clouds hanging over his head began to disperse.

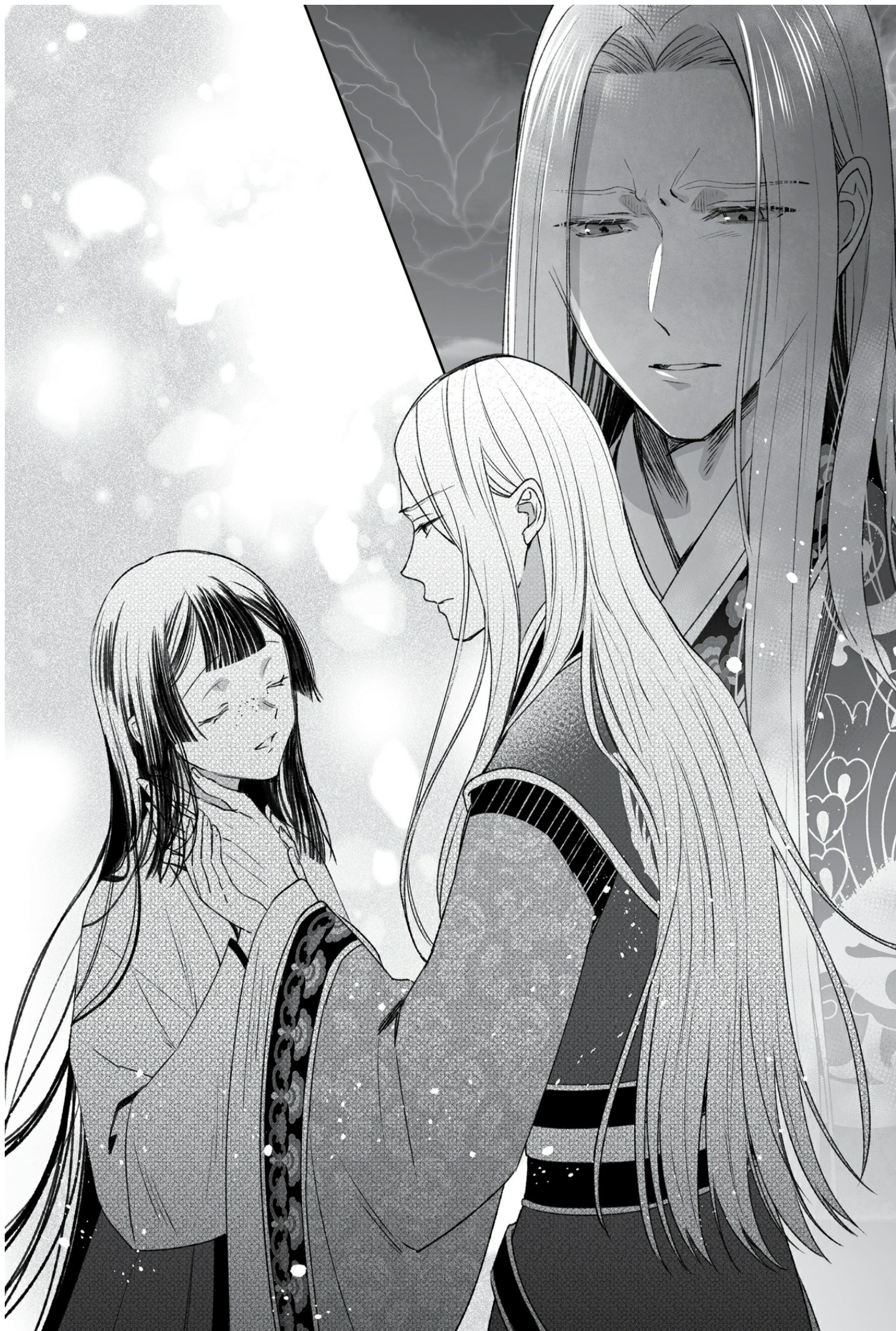
"I'm all right, Your Highness. While it's true that Lady Keigetsu cast a spell to switch our bodies, I've been granted a healthy vessel and blessed with a friend as a result."

Reirin took one of Gyoumei's hands in her own and guided it toward her neck. He tensed, afraid he might graze her open wound, but she pressed it firmly to her throat.

"See? Don't you feel that vigorous pulse?"

"Reirin..." muttered Gyoumei, almost taken aback.

Reirin smiled softly. "I've been truly happy."



“But...I mustn’t exploit your kindness. I have to make amends.”

“Well, I suppose...”

The lightning had stopped, and the cold wind that had swept through was slowly but surely dying down. Seeing Gyoumei dig in his heels even as he regained his composure, Reirin turned over the thoughts in her head.

I’m sure he wouldn’t like it if I forgave him without any fuss.

The thought almost brought a rueful smile to her face, but she knew she’d feel the same way if she were in his position. It was then that an idea flashed into her mind, and the corners of her mouth curled into a mischievous smile.

“Then let’s have you atone.”

Reirin glanced up at Gyoumei, a teasing glint in her half-lidded gaze. She looked almost like a villainess whose every glance and word toyed with the hearts of men.

“Now that you mention it, Your Highness, I was quite saddened when you wouldn’t listen to a word I had to say—so much so that I don’t know if I can bring myself to call you my ‘dear cousin’ ever again.”

“I really *am* sorry for what I’ve done, Reirin.”

“Oh? Then I take it you’d like to earn back the trust I once had in you?”

Gyoumei nodded without missing a beat. “Of course.”

“In that case,” Reirin began, speaking more forcefully, “for starters, don’t penalize Lady Shu Keigetsu for her part in the switch. Noble Consort Shu is the one who incited her to act. She alone should be punished. Lady Keigetsu ought to be pardoned on account of being manipulated and bringing me happiness as a result.”

“But that won’t make up for—”

“Quiet, please,” said Reirin, pressing her index finger to his lips as soon as he opened his mouth to protest. As his eyes grew wide, she brought her face to his once more. “I will brook no argument. I’m the girl you berated as a ‘villainess,’ lest you forget. Be silent and do exactly as this she-devil commands of you,” she

ordered, smiling.

Gyoumei was struck speechless.

It was the first show of impudence Gyoumei had ever seen from her, comparable to neither the obsequiousness of the body's original owner, Shu Keigetsu, nor the fragile quality she used to have as Kou Reirin. Never had he felt so convinced that she was indeed her aunt's niece. Curiously enough, this powerful flap of the once-delicate, graceful butterfly's wings didn't leave Gyoumei feeling disgruntled but instead came as a refreshing surprise.

"Right..."

The prince unconsciously brought a hand to his mouth, as if tracing where her slender finger had touched it. What came to his mind then was the Ghost Festival—specifically, the sight of her as she had captivated him with her powerful and dignified dance. She was both Shu Keigetsu and not. She was Kou Reirin, but she differed ever so slightly from the Kou Reirin he knew. Was it possible to fall in love with the same woman twice over, he wondered?

Gyoumei nodded. "All right. I'll follow your wishes regarding Shu Keigetsu's punishment."

"Thank you. Then, for item number two: I want Her Majesty to have first say over what becomes of Noble Consort Shu." Rather than relent when her first wish was granted, Reirin kept pushing for more. "She was the victim here, so it's only fair. Besides...Noble Consort Shu is already undergoing punishment."

Reirin cast a glance toward a corner of the garden. Her breath coming in ragged gasps, the consort in Shin-u's custody lay in such a broken heap that he didn't even need to restrain her. From the looks of it, the counter-venomcraft had begun to consume her.

"No... No... *Nooo!* Stay back!"

What was it that she saw in the void: a centipede, or the spider she herself had set loose? It was hard to watch anyone suffer, no matter who it was. Reirin quietly averted her gaze.

If someone were to draw the Bow of Warding for her, the malady could be driven off for a short time, and if their arrow struck true, perhaps the curse

would be weakened. Much like Reirin had done, alleviating the physical symptoms with medicine was an option too. Then again, the question of whether anyone would step forward to *do* that for her hinged on her actions up to that point.

It's incredible how the heart can falter.

Her desire to make the woman who had hurt her loved ones pay conflicted with the twinge of guilt she felt over hurting another person. In all likelihood, she wouldn't have comprehended such a feeling back when she was just "Reirin."

Noble Consort Shu might have had her own reasons. Criminal or not, perhaps it was wrong to abandon anyone to their torment. Reirin felt pity, trepidation, and an uneasiness that made her second-guess herself again and again, wondering if this was the right thing to do. All those feelings she had once relinquished felt so terribly vivid.

No doubt this is what it means to be alive, Reirin told herself.

No matter if it meant meddling with curses, Reirin would protect those she wanted to keep safe. If someone considered that to be an act of evil, she would embrace the stigma with a smile on her face.

Oh dear. It's almost like I really am a villainess.

Reirin blinked as she visualized herself smirking on the heels of an evil deed. For all she lamented her previous failure to pull off a "bad girl" act, perhaps she had more of a knack for villainy than she thought.

Gyoumei bobbed his head in a magnanimous nod. "Very well. You have a point that the decision ought to rest with Her Majesty, or with His Majesty the Emperor if not her. I accept those terms. Is that enough, Reirin? Do you think you can go back to calling me 'dear cousin' like you used to?" He stared back at her with a faint hint of tension in his gaze.

Although she was a Maiden, one of the five women meant to one day become his wife, he was all too aware that she could easily foist that position off onto another Kou woman if she so desired. And with her negligible thirst for power, he knew she wouldn't hesitate to do exactly that if push came to shove.

Reirin gazed quietly back at the man who watched her with bated breath. While she knew on an intellectual level that she shouldn't be forcing the master of the Maiden Court—the man known as the Supreme One—to beg, she couldn't resist piling on one more request.

Because inept as I may be...I'm still a villainess.

It was a given that a villainess would run the gamut of selfishness, bringing a man to his knees with but a single smile.

"Now, let's see... If you could grant me just one more wish, perhaps I *might* be willing to call you that again."

"What? Just name it."

She snuck a glance at Leelee and Keigetsu. Overwhelmed by the exchange, both girls were watching her in silence like they had surrendered themselves to the flow. Reirin flashed them both a gentle smile, then turned to look at Gyoumei again.

"Don't mind if I do, then. Please—"

And thus did the greedy girl who had made two whole wishes upon a comet go on to boldly voice her third wish before the future emperor.

Having fallen to the rank of criminal, Shu Gabi was stripped of her position as the Noble Consort and cast into the Maiden Court dungeons for the handful of days leading up to her banishment from the inner court.

It had now been three days since her venomcraft had come back to haunt her. During that time, the empress herself had held a hearing, in which it was determined that Shu Gabi alone would be exiled, Shu Keigetsu would be put under a week-long house arrest for failing to stop her guardian's plot, and the remaining members of the Shu clan would be acquitted. All in all, it was a remarkably lenient sentence for the crime of wielding a venomcraft against the empress and jeopardizing the lives of two Maidens.

When Gyoumei implored the emperor to call for the extinction of the entire Shu line, Kenshuu had shut him down with a single comment: "The *empress* has

the final say over the affairs of the inner court, thanks.” Due at least in part to his promise to Reirin, Gyoumei had declined to lodge any further protest, but perhaps taking exception to the verdict as the crown prince, he had continued to sulk nonetheless.

In the face of his disapproving scowl, Kenshuu had added, “It appears that Shu Gabi’s grudge started with the death of her son. Frankly, if *I* had lost *you*, even I might not have been able to cope without finding someone to blame and turning to curses. Let it go. In the end, the worst to happen was that I suffered from a nasty cold for a day or two.”

Reirin, who had also been present for the hearing—back in her old body by this point, of course—had winced at the phrasing but concurred with the sentiment. Naturally, Keigetsu hadn’t the least bit of interest in objecting to such a merciful sentence. There in his capacity as the Eagle Eyes’ captain, Shin-u had rolled his eyes, but he was in no position to go against the empress’s wishes.

And thus was the exceptionally lenient decision to exile Shu Gabi and *only* Shu Gabi reached.

Since revealing the truth of the assassination attempt was sure to disrupt the power balance between the five clans, the vague charge of “a grave insult to the empress” was prepared for when the sentence was officially pronounced.

Consumed by the counter-curse, Gabi no longer had the strength to get up from the floor. By the time she was carted off to the dungeons, she was too powerless to do anything but groan, her face pallid with chills, that Kenshuu had deemed it unnecessary to close the iron bars of her cell. Since then, all that could be heard echoing through the darkness of the dungeon rife with rotten smells and sweltering heat was the endless loop of Gabi’s feeble moans.

Then, a flickering flame appeared in the darkness.

“It’s blazing hot down here, but you’re looking awfully cold.”

The visitor’s hushed voice was deep for a woman. The one who had shown up with a candlestick in hand was none other than Empress Kenshuu herself.

Gabi looked back at her, wheezing ragged breaths.

“Can’t even manage a response?” muttered Kenshuu. “Not that I blame you, when you’re stuck in a place like this.”

For once, the empress who was almost never seen without an amused twist to her lips wore a face devoid of all expression.

“My...how brave of...Her Majesty...to stand before an enemy...without a single attendant.”

Gabi’s halting fragments of sarcasm managed to draw the first show of emotion from Kenshuu: She chuckled deep in her throat. “See that? Even trapped in a dungeon that’d drive the average woman mad in a matter of hours, you still have it in you to talk smack. I knew I had you pegged for a fierce woman.”

“...”

Kenshuu set her candle down before the scowling ex-consort, then hefted the enormous burlap sack she had carried in with her. Despite its size, however, its contents were light enough that she managed to set it down on the floor without a sound before gently propping it against the dungeon wall.

After a few long moments spent staring down at Gabi’s prone form in silence, Kenshuu said, “Be it embroidery or murder plots, you sure like to make things elaborate. How much time and effort did you end up wasting just to get even with me?”

“...”

“This was the whole reason you took Shu Keigetsu in, wasn’t it? She’s got a lot to learn, but she has a good heart deep down. Did you really want to kill me badly enough to toy with her emotions and take her life? Did you really want me to suffer so much that you’d tear down Reirin, my greatest treasure—my one memento of my sister—to do it?”

Kenshuu had managed to maintain an unruffled demeanor all throughout the hearing, but now that she was alone with the culprit, it was all she could do to contain her fury. The Kou clan blood sought to love more than be loved. As the head of the inner court, Kenshuu was far angrier about the transgressions against the two Maidens than her own predicament.

“...”

Gabi gazed dazedly up at the empress who simmered with quiet rage. Then, slowly, her mouth twisted into a sneer. It was the first expression other than anguish she'd managed to make in quite a while.

“Of course. I didn't even...hesitate to use Keigetsu. She was...so pathetic, so dim-witted...devoid of a single redeeming quality. She foolishly...believed whatever I told her. She hung on to my every word, so trusting...” Gabi narrowed her gaze as if she were staring at something far in the distance. “I wondered time and time again...if my son would have loved his mother so dearly...had he lived.”

Was there the slightest hint of guilt in her voice, perhaps? No, more strongly than that, her unfocused black eyes had a look of yearning to them. Those were the eyes of a woman who suffered the unquenchable thirst of longing for something she could never have.

Upon seeing that, Kenshoo thought, *Her emotions run too deep.*

That chasm of emotion ran deep enough for her to spend twenty whole years fixated on a son she had carried for less than ten months—whose face she had never even seen. So deep, she had used a girl who adored her as a tool in her revenge.

Another stifling silence fell over the dungeon.

The first to break it was Kenshoo. “You know something? I used to think that the flames of resentment burned a fierce scarlet. That no matter how twisted a path it provided, it didn't matter so long as it kept a person warm and breathing. I really believed that.”

“What...?”

“I had it all wrong. Those flames burn a pale blue. No matter how hard the fire rages, I'm sure a heart set ablaze by hatred feels as cold as a prison of ice.” Kenshoo kneeled down where Gabi lay. “A weakling like you could never hope to endure such frigid temperatures. I never should have left you to keep warm by the flames of resentment.”

She then wrapped her arms around the other woman's shoulders, lifting her

up into an embrace.

“I should have held you like this.”

“ ... ”

“Say, Gabi...”

For the first time in twenty years, Kenshoo called the wide-eyed woman not by her title, but by her name.

“Did you honestly believe the words of that Kin vixen? Did you truly believe that I would put a curse on you and steal your son’s fortune just to swaddle Gyomei in the dragon’s qi?” Kenshoo asked, then hugged Gabi so strong and tight as to deny her the chance to answer. Her gaunt, listless body looked so terribly pitiful. “Come now, Gabi. You know that couldn’t be true. All I ever wanted was to see you happy. But how did that turn out? I left you to freeze, standing by while you smoldered in the flames of hatred.”

A teardrop trickled down Gabi’s snow-white cheek. The hot tear dropped onto Kenshoo’s shoulder and seeped into her garment.

Feeling the damp warmth on her skin, she went on, “The cane of hatred never did anything to support your weight. Let go of your grudge against me, Gabi. It doesn’t matter how much you limp or wobble in the process—learn to walk on your own.”

“ ... ”

Kenshoo pulled back just as Gabi’s face began to crumple. She reached for the burlap sack leaning against the wall and took out what was inside of it. What she unveiled was a giant bow the size of a grown woman. It was the newly restrung Bow of Warding.

“I’ll let you have this. Just plucking the string with your finger should scare off the malady haunting you for a time.” As Gabi stared back, unblinking, Kenshoo thrust the bow before her. “Remember this: Henceforth, no one will draw that bow for you. Only you can save yourself.”

No more clinging to a grudge. No more using someone else as a stepping stone. From now on, she had to walk her path alone.

Gabi stared up at Kenshoo like she was dazzled by the sight. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She made her best effort to force a sneer upon her lips, only for her mouth to tremble and another tear to fall in its place.

“Why...a bow? Should I take this as...a threat?” Gabi asked, her smile racked with sobs.

“Why do I only get a choice of weapons...? Should I take this as a threat?”

Kenshoo immediately caught on. Her own lips curving into a grin, she replied, “Fool. Don’t you know the true significance of giving someone a weapon?”

Was it Gabi’s imagination, or were there tears forming in the other woman’s eyes?

“I do,” Gabi choked out, her voice quivering pathetically.

“It means that even if we’re too far apart for me to rush to your side, I’m still thinking of you and protecting you in the form of a blade or a bow.”

“I know it all too well.”

What awaited her was the harsh life of an exile. Without a single soul to rely upon, she would have no choice but to make her own way through life all alone. Yet...someone would be watching over her.

Gabi lifted her broken body and accepted the bow with a shaky hand. Once Kenshoo had passed it off to her, she left without another word. For a while, the dungeon was filled with nothing but the sizzle of the candle’s wick burning away and the sound of Gabi’s breathing.

“...”

Gritting her teeth, she gave the bowstring a tug. The emaciated arms of a woman naturally couldn’t force out much of a sound. Still, with that one minuscule tremor, Gabi felt the encroach of the malady upon her body weaken ever so slightly.

Twaang.

The sound was as meager and flimsy as her own breath.

Twaang.

Even so, Gabi plucked the string over and over again.

“ ... ”

Eventually, she closed her eyes as if to savor its notes.

“All I ever wanted was to see you happy.”

“Perhaps...”

A crystalline tear flowed past her shapely lips.

“That’s all I’ve wanted to hear for these past twenty years, Lady Kenshuu.”

Neither her tears nor the clumsy vibrations of the string ceased for a long time to come.

Epilogue

IT WAS A MIDSUMMER DAY, the time when the sun shone down at its brightest. A lone girl was plucking grass outside a storehouse on the fringes of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. Her sweat-drenched robe was blazing scarlet. Upon closer inspection, the identity of this high-ranking Shu court lady was revealed to be Leelee.

The storehouse had been reinforced quite a bit since the beginnings of summer, and its garden was gorgeously maintained. As she rose to her feet with a look of satisfaction, Leelee wiped the sweat from her brow.

“Goodness. Look at you, sweating like a pig,” came a mocking voice from the direction that led to the main palace.

When Leelee turned around, she saw the Maiden of the Shu clan standing there, clad in a vivid vermillion robe and her skirt billowing in the breeze.

“Would it kill you to take better care of yourself and wipe your sweat a little more often? C’mon, don’t just *stand* there—get in the shade of that tree! You’d better chill the skin around your largest arteries too. Take this hand towel I wrung in ice water and cool off that empty head of yours.”

The infamous sewer rat of the Maiden Court, “Shu Keigetsu,” shoved a cold hand towel at Leelee before cutting across the yard with an air of purpose. Her now-beautiful skin laid bare to the sunlight, she turned her head to look at her attendant.

“What wonder...I mean, what is *with* your gardening skills, anyway? You’ve weeded the whole yard so thoroughly that there’s nothing left for *me* to do. What are you, some kind of genius? Learn to save your mistress a little face, for mercy’s sake!”

“Uh...”

“Enough! I don’t want to hear any backtalk! Your next task is to get a full hour’s rest. Now hurry up and get in the shade! Make sure to drink some water. Add a pinch of sugar and salt, while you’re at it,” the Maiden cheerfully asserted before spinning back around.

“Scuse me,” Leelee cut in with a sigh. “You couldn’t be more obvious, Lady Reirin.”

“Huh?” Her shoulders jumping, the other girl turned her head from where she’d crouched down in the dirt. “Wh...why?! I was careful to talk like her this time!”

“Uh... The issue runs a little deeper than her speech patterns, I’d say.”

“B-but I even made sure to insult you!”

“Uh-huh. That had to be the most loving scolding I’ve ever gotten,” Leelee remarked with a patronizing look.

Shu Keigetsu—or rather, her body’s current inhabitant, Kou Reirin—looked like the world had come crashing down around her. “This can’t be... I wrote up such a detailed list of possible questions and answers in preparation for this switch!”

“What’s the point in wasting your effort on that? It’s obvious something is off from the second a Maiden starts getting down in the dirt. Hey, don’t start playing with a pill bug in your hand like it’s second nature!” Leelee scolded Reirin, who had instinctively plunged her hands into the field amid her case of the blues.

Reirin scrambled to retract her arm. “Sorry. Habit.”

Leelee heaved another sigh. “I sure hope His Highness doesn’t come by today...”

“I-It’ll be all right! I heard he was wrapped up in a banquet with the other kingdoms until dawn. He’ll be far too exhausted to be out and about this morning.”

“*Please* don’t say things like that. Coming from you, it’s practically inviting the opposite to happen.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic, Leelee. His Highness isn’t going to show up. He won’t have a chance to see through the switch. I promise!” Reirin insisted, starting to get defensive.

Indeed, she had made a bet with Gyoumei about whether he could manage to

see through her switch.

“Please permit me to switch bodies every so often from now on. Should you manage to catch me in the act of trading places with Lady Keigetsu, I promise to go back to calling you my ‘dear cousin,’ as shall I swear to remain your Maiden forevermore.”

That had been her third request of him. Despite his initial perplexment, Gyoumei had erupted into laughter a few moments later. Then, upon reclaiming his usual regal demeanor, he had given a nod of his head.

“Very well. Then I’ll be sure to catch you when the time comes, my little butterfly.”

Life had returned to his eyes, and a belligerent smile had settled upon his lips. She had managed to ignite his hunting instincts, it seemed.

She sure knows how to fire people up... Not that she seems to realize that herself.

Leelee gave a wry little smile as she watched Reirin press a hand to her chest and mumble to herself that everything was going to be all right.

Gyoumei looked to be taking the bet quite seriously; ever since that day, he would come by both the Kou Palace and Shu Palace at least once every three days in hopes of seeing through the girls’ switch. Twice now Reirin had swapped bodies for one full day without getting caught, and it was fresh in Leelee’s mind how each of those times had ended with Keigetsu trembling and screaming, “Please, no more! He’s definitely going to find out next time!” Still, the fact that Keigetsu didn’t put her foot down more strongly was a sign of how well Reirin had twisted her around her finger.

Furthermore, Gyoumei’s frequent and amicable visits to the Shu Palace under the pretext that “she might be Reirin” had spared the Shu clan from coming under attack by the other four families. Despite it being the house of the exiled Noble Consort, if the crown prince was giving them such warm treatment, everyone else had no choice but to follow suit.

I get the sense that Lady Reirin accounted for that when she made the proposal too...

When it came down to it, all those around her couldn't help but be drawn to Reirin's boundless benevolence.

Okay, "benevolence" might be a shared trait of the whole Kou clan.

Leelee thought back to how, upon learning the truth, the empress had chosen to banish only Noble Consort Shu—or Shu Gabi, as it were—from the inner court. Despite what a ghoulish plot it had been, she had declined to go public with the details, instead sentencing her to exile on the vague charges of “a grave insult.”

For the record, the matter of the swap itself had been kept a secret between those already in the know; thus, it was on the grounds of failing to prevent the Shu clan's insult—not the crime of stealing Reirin's body—that Keigetsu had been sentenced to another week-long period of house arrest. It was rather light as punishments went, but both her cooperation in putting a stop to the venomcraft and Reirin's intervention had served to help her case.

Now that her term of suspension was over, Shu Keigetsu had her hands full serving as the representative of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion in Noble Consort Shu's absence. Though she scarcely had a moment to sleep, she seemed to be having a better time of it than anyone would have expected. Perhaps that had something to do with the fact that the court ladies who had always scorned her were too harried to even think about that, or perhaps nothing else could compare to the thrill of her occasional switches with Reirin. Whenever the pair traded places, Keigetsu would spend her time in the Kou Palace getting a grudge-laden hazing from Tousetsu.

“Man, who would've thought things could work out so peacefully?”

Upon settling under the tree as she'd been commanded, Leelee looked out over the garden.

Now that Tousetsu had turned it into a common space, Reirin had invested no small amount of time and effort in its upkeep. With flowers blooming here and there and vegetables growing in abundance, the well-manicured grounds had come to look like a true picture of paradise. It was a scene she never could have pictured on the day she clutched a dagger in trembling hands, dripping with mud.

“Look! See this, Leelee? I turned over all the rocks where the pill bugs like to gather! This is what one might call the destruction of a habitat—the overthrow of a state! Hah... Even our classic villainess Lady Keigetsu would surely tremble to witness this act of evil!”

Off in the sunlit garden, Reirin lifted a rock with a look of self-satisfaction on her face. Leelee’s critique of her villainess act wasn’t sitting well with her, it seemed.

“Uh-huh. That’s terrible. You’re evil incarnate,” Leelee replied with an unenthusiased round of applause.

Reirin’s lips twisted into a pout. “You’re so mean, Leelee.”

“Am not. Is that any way to talk about such a devoted court lady?”

“You *are*! Don’t think I can’t see that blazing scarlet robe. It’s been a long time now since I gave you a gamboge gold one,” said Reirin, her gaze flicking to the girl’s outer garment. She seemed to be eagerly anticipating the day Leelee would start her work at the Palace of the Golden Qilin.

“C’mon, you know how it is... It’s not like I don’t *want* to wear it or anything. I just can’t up and leave the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion in this state. Besides, when the two of you trade places, isn’t it more convenient to have someone at the Shu Palace who knows what’s going on?” Leelee mumbled off a string of excuses.

“I suppose that’s true,” conceded Reirin, backing down even as her face remained fixed in a pout. “Oh, look how big the watermelons have grown since last I checked! If we don’t harvest them soon, they just might split open. I wonder if these would taste better chilled with the water of the Violet Dragon’s Spring... Perhaps I should try asking His Highness...” Her attention quickly diverted to the garden’s fruits, she began mumbling to herself about the best ways to enjoy them.

“Uh, how about you stop treating the forbidden spring like it’s some kind of ice house?”

Despite the exasperated sigh she heaved, in the very next moment, Leelee found herself dazzled by the sight of Reirin bouncing around with a watermelon

in her arms.

The truth is...there's another reason I won't wear the gamboge gold robe, she thought to herself.

The reason she kept finding excuses to stick around the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion was simple: As long as she lived in the storehouse, she could be someone special to Reirin.

Keigetsu likely kept agreeing to their switches for a similar reason. Sharing a common secret made them feel like a pair of best friends, and for all she feigned reluctance, she refused to let go of the first companion she had ever made. The same went for Gyoumei, who visited the Kou and Shu palaces countless times in his eagerness to guess her identity; for Tousetsu, who followed Reirin around more faithfully than ever in lieu of an apology; and for Shin-u, who made frequent visits to the storehouse under the guise of work. Each of them wanted to capture Kou Reirin—that nimble, graceful butterfly—in the palm of their own hand.

“You’re a villainess, all right.”

The summer garden was flooded with light, and the lush grass and trees towered toward the heavens. Captivated, Leelee continued to gaze at the girl who stood at the center of it all, her eyes sparkling with a brilliance to rival her surroundings—at the villainess who stole people’s hearts and never let them go.

“Captain? What are you standing around in the middle of the grass for?” Bunkou called out from behind Shin-u, snapping his boss to his senses. “Even if this storehouse *is* technically considered a common space, we’re still on Shu grounds. It’s not a good idea for the captain of the Eagle Eyes to dawdle too long in another clan’s palace. Now that we’ve finished making the rounds, we ought to head back.”

The eunuch was as reluctant to rock the boat as ever.

Yet when his gaze traveled past his boss and landed upon the sight of the Shu Maiden and her attendant engaging in pleasant banter, Bunkou blinked in

surprise. “Oh, it would seem Shu Keigetsu is helping to tend the fields today. It feels like it’s been a while since I last saw her having such a friendly chat with one of her court ladies. She’s gotten better, to be sure, but she still picks fights with her retainers on the regular.”

“Something like that.” Shin-u gave a noncommittal nod.

His subordinate hadn’t been informed about Shu Keigetsu and Kou Reirin switching bodies for the ten or so days following the Double Sevens Festival. It wasn’t hard to imagine that his perception of Shu Keigetsu had landed on “She acted strange for a while there, but she soon went back to being her normal, selfish self—if a little nicer than before.”

“Perhaps that’s a sign that she’s in a good mood today. Did they serve her favorite food for breakfast or something?”

“Who knows.”

Bunkou leaned forward. “Or is it that she managed to get her makeup just right today? She *is* looking a little more beautiful than—”

Shin-u cut off his attempt at a more detailed observation. “Nothing to note about the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. Let’s go.”

“Huh? But if Shu Keigetsu is here, shouldn’t we perform a more involved inspection? I’m not sure why, but it seems that His Highness has been keeping as close an eye on Shu Keigetsu as Lady Kou Reirin herself these days,” Bunkou shot back in a hurry, as desperate to score points as ever. “Don’t you think His Highness would be pleased if we reported back to him on any abnormalities in Shu Keigetsu’s behavior?”

“Our prince is a busy man. Don’t bother him with something so trivial.” Shin-u curtly dismissed the suggestion before turning swiftly on his heel.

In truth, he knew that Gyoumei coveted tidbits of information like that more than anything. That was precisely *why* he didn’t want it to get back to him.

“Should you manage to catch me in the act of trading places with Lady Keigetsu, I swear to remain your Maiden forevermore.”

He recalled the mischievous, alluring lilt to her voice. Despite all her botched

attempts to play the villainess, the games Kou Reirin had played with Gyoumei's heart were far more nefarious than any act. Now that the prince had cast aside the melancholy that plagued him, if he ever managed to happen upon one of her switches, he would no doubt lock Reirin away in the palm of his hand regardless of what anyone else had to say about it. The poor butterfly who so loved to flutter around enchanting the people would be forever trapped inside his cage.

It's not like I'm neglecting my duties as the Eagle Eyes' captain or anything.

Shin-u's job was to remove outside forces from the Maiden Court and uphold its law and order. It wasn't to observe the Maidens' moods, nor was it to make pointless reports like "Today Shu Keigetsu ran around plunging her hands into the dirt" or "Her technique when she lifted that gourd was magnificent" to government officials.

It was only two hours of difference.

If he had to guess, Gyoumei had realized that "Shu Keigetsu" was actually Kou Reirin when she told him off at the storehouse. It couldn't have been more than two hours later when the Bow of Warding's string had snapped and led Shin-u to his own epiphany.

If only he'd noticed two hours earlier, perhaps he could have cornered Kou Reirin and forced her to reveal herself. He could have seen through to the truth that not even the cousin she'd spent so much time with had noticed, unraveling her down to her very soul. Perhaps he could have imprinted his own image onto those unclouded eyes of hers.

Why am I so obsessed with her?

Finding his own behavior to be odd, he came to a sudden halt as he was heading down the grassy path. Up until now, he'd held little interest in anything besides combat or weapon maintenance, and he'd never had someone else's face occupying his mind so much of the time.

But...yeah, that's it. It feels a lot like a hunt.

After giving it some thought, Shin-u hit upon the answer that made the most sense to him. This was like a hunt. His heart raced, his senses sharpened, and he

registered nothing but his prey in his sights. That was all the truer when the quarry was so beautiful and agile. His soul kept on screaming that he would bring her down no matter what.

A smile rose to the lips that so rarely showed emotion. In that moment, Shin-u felt a strange sense of excitement bubbling up from deep within him.

I'm going to bring her down no matter what.

After all, he was the military officer who had been granted the title of “eagle.”

Upon casting a single glance toward the powerful blue hues of the sky, Shin-u strode toward the gates to the Shu Palace with an assured gait.

“Huh! So *this* is the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. Even the gates look fancy.”

“We’ll get in trouble if we barge in unannounced, Brother.”

It was then that his ears caught a few fragments of imprudent conversation. Just beyond the imposing gate, Shin-u saw two men conversing in a secluded clump of bushes.

“Oh, it’ll be fine! We just have to take the long way around and hop the wall.”

“That’s an even worse idea. If we run into an Eagle Eye and it turns into a fight, Aunt Kenshuu will rip us apart before we can get a look at the beloved sister we came this far to see.”

Owing to the distance between them, the duo had yet to notice that Shin-u was standing there. Both men looked to be roughly around the same age as him. The yellow motif of their otherwise plain robes indicated a relation to the Kou clan. The air about them was far from graceful. Still, the pair had clean-cut, well-defined features.

As Shin-u’s face twisted into a suspicious scowl, the larger of the pair—the one who had been referred to as “Brother”—broke into a grin reminiscent of a naughty child. “But aren’t you dying to steal a glimpse of her face? Let’s go get a look at the villainess who pushed our cute, adorable Reirin from the Seventh Pagoda.”

Bonus Story:

A Contest of Archery

“WHAT? You’ll be too busy to spend time with me *again*?”

It was a late summer evening, around when the breeze blowing through the courtyard had taken a turn for the cooler. Kenshoo, mistress of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, made the trek to her niece’s chambers, where she was met with utter disappointment.

“But the Maiden Court is closed tomorrow! I had hoped we could spend the morning training together.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty. His Highness asked me to join him on a walk around the gardens.” Reirin, the bearer of bad news, poured her aunt a fresh cup of tea, her face falling. “As tempting as it is to start off the day doing practice swings together, I’m afraid I’ve already accepted His Highness’s invitation. I really am sorry.”

“Curse you, Gyoumei! My own son thinks he can steal Reirin from me two weeks in a row, does he? The rascal’s grown a little too big for his boots,” Kenshoo seethed in a manner rather unbecoming of an empress.

Long accustomed to her aunt’s behavior, Reirin did nothing but place a hand to her cheek, forlorn. “Don’t blame him. It’s all because I’ve become too wicked a villainess. Now that I’ve talked back to him once before, he must be beside himself wondering what evil I might get up to next. He can’t afford to relax his guard for even a moment.”

“O-oh?” Kenshoo replied, nearly choking on the tea she’d brought to her lips.

The reason Gyoumei never took his eyes off Reirin for a single moment was no doubt so that he wouldn’t miss out on her next switch and, above all else, because he wanted to spend more time with her. The empress found it hilarious—correction, *sad*—that none of it seemed to have gotten through to Reirin whatsoever.

All the same, Kenshoo enjoyed seeing her son so defenseless to Reirin's whims. There were times when his efforts to play the part of the perfect prince made him a touch lacking in the charm department. As a Kou woman, she felt much more endeared to him when he slipped up and slumped his shoulders in defeat every now and then.

Still, Gyoumei never entertained the thought of using his mistakes to garner sympathy. For all that he regretted his failure to see through the switch, he dealt with it by scrambling to make up the lost ground. That mettle of his had its own charms.

For Kenshoo's part, although she had sensed something off about Reirin, she'd never dreamed that the girl had traded places with someone else. When Reirin later confessed the truth to her, it had come as more of a shock than she would've liked to admit. Nevertheless, seeing as she had her dignity as the empress to maintain, she had listened to the explanation without batting an eye and responded with nothing but a nod and a "That figures." That reaction had been all it took to move Reirin to tears, the Maiden marveling, "Leave it Your Majesty to see through everything!"

Kenshoo had chuckled lightly, neither confirming nor denying her assumption. It was well within her rights as the empress to be a little shameless sometimes.

Fighting down the smile that threatened to creep over her face, Kenshoo cleared her throat. "I see. Well, it's true that you've been a bad girl—no doubt about it. It's little wonder Gyoumei can't keep his eyes off you. Come to think of it, hasn't the captain of the Eagle Eyes been keeping an awfully close watch on you as of late too?" she pointed out.

Ever since the switch, Shin-u had made frequent visits to both the Palace of the Golden Qilin and the Shu Palace storehouse and gone out of his way to make conversation with Reirin. Even on the days off she spent with Gyoumei, he would make a point of accompanying them more than was strictly necessary.

His behavior was clearly that of someone monitoring Gyoumei's attempts to get ahead in the game, and the looks he gave Reirin were filled with a passion like no other. Yet here too, Reirin lowered her gaze bashfully and said, "Yes... I *am* the malefactor who broke the Bow of Warding in my enthusiasm. Knowing

the Gen clan's fondness for weapons, I imagine he's become quite leery of me."

"Pff... Right."

Of *course* that would be her explanation. Kenshuu came close to bursting out laughing again, but after a beat, she schooled her face into a neutral expression. Her own son was one thing, but she had no reason to point out that surly-faced Shin-u's affections to Reirin.

"Could be. And to think I asked him not to come down too hard on you, since it was for a good cause. Only a petty man would get so worked up over one trifling national heirloom."

"The bow would have rejected the hands of your run-of-the-mill craftsman, so in the end, we had to ask the captain to restring it for us in light of his Gen lineage. What's worse, the bow disappeared from the national treasury afterward... I can't blame him for resenting me."

If the sad droop of her shoulders was anything to go by, Reirin was convinced that the men's frequent visits came from a place of caution and scrutiny. Here she was fortunate enough to have a man on each arm, both so gorgeous as to leave any woman in the Maiden Court swooning, but she didn't look the least bit happy about it.

"Hrm," Kenshuu hummed with a nod, until at last she slapped her knee and proposed, "You poor thing. Very well! Why don't I grant you one day of complete freedom?"

"Huh?"

Reirin blinked in confusion, but Kenshuu paid her reaction no mind. She rose from her chair and cast an excited look around the tidy room.

"As the boy's mother, I've had my own concerns about Gyoumei's unending workload as of late. The little brat's been pushing himself even harder than he has to, lest the recent conspiracy spark unrest in the kingdom. To make matters worse, whatever free time he manages to carve out for himself goes to 'keeping an eye' on you, so he never has a moment to relax. Even Kousai and the rest of the bureaucrats are starting to worry for him."

"Oh dear... It breaks my heart to hear it."

“It’s his own fault for managing his time poorly. Don’t worry your pretty little head over it.”

If anything, his trysts with Reirin were the one bit of respite he had allowed himself, but Kenshoo set that inconvenient truth aside and instead met the Maiden’s worries with a benevolent smile. *She* wanted a turn to hang out with her adorable niece too.

“And then there’s the head Eagle Eye, Shin-u. While it’s all well and good to have a knack for the martial arts, his training sessions are as demanding as you’d expect from someone with his abnormal reserves of stamina. His subordinates have been begging for even a single day’s reprieve from doing their archery practice in the scorching heat.”

“Goodness! Do they really undergo such grueling training?” her niece asked, leaning forward in excitement.

“Hey! That’s nothing to look so enchanted about!” Kenshoo chided her before plucking something from the shelves. It was a sachet Reirin had sewn to practice her embroidery. “Your skill is always a sight to behold. You couldn’t give this to Gyomei on the Double Sevens Festival, I take it?”

“Right. That was the original plan, but I missed my chance amid all the fuss.”

Following in the Weaver Girl’s footsteps, it was an Ei tradition for girls to give their sweethearts a sachet on the Double Sevens Festival, the occasion for girls to put their needlework to the test. Being a Maiden, it was no surprise that Reirin had made one for Gyomei, but she had failed to give it to him in all the chaos of the body swap.

“It would be rude to give His Highness something out of season. Brother Senior was lamenting that no one had given him a sachet, so I was planning to make a second one for Brother Junior and hand them over together.”

“Please! This would be wasted on the likes of them. No, I’ll use this for a *prize*.”

“Pardon?” Reirin asked, giving a curious tilt of her head.

Kenshoo curved her lips into a smirk. “Here’s a bit of advice, Reirin: Whenever two pieces stand in your path, the trick to taking them out is to make them fight

each other. Your aunt here is going to teach you all about how to win a game of chess tomorrow.”

A pregnant smile on her face, the empress dropped a light kiss upon the sachet. Her mood having taken a turn for the better, she then asked of her charge, “So be sure to set your morning aside for me.”

The next morning, a certain man hurried down the cloister lit by dazzling rays of sunlight. It was the crown prince of the Kingdom of Ei, Gyoumei, looking dignified as ever right down to the topknot on his head. Having just finished up the huge pile of work he’d been chipping away at since dawn, he had finally secured himself a bit of time to see Reirin.

“For a prince known for his regal, composed bearing, you appear to be in quite the rush. If it’s so hard to fit into your schedule, it might be wise to refrain from asking Lady Reirin out on each and every day of rest.”

On Gyoumei’s heels was the captain of the Eagle Eyes, Shin-u, who kept pace with the prince as he hurried down the cloister.

“Your insistence on visiting the Palace of the Golden Qilin each week keeps forcing me to cancel the archery training I have the Eagle Eyes do during their breaks. And my own problems aside, I can’t approve of the prince calling upon a Maiden without reason,” his half brother declared in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Hmph. I don’t recall asking you to accompany me, Shin-u,” Gyoumei shot back at him without missing a beat. He looked at the guard walking right behind him, one eyebrow raised. “I don’t have any gifts for you to carry today, and any one of the Eagle Eyes would make for a sufficient escort. I won’t stop you from doing your duty as captain and getting back to your training this instant.”

“May I be frank?” Shin-u didn’t give an inch. Instead, he shot barbs at Gyoumei with all the emotion with which one might say, *It sure is hot out today*. “It would take someone of at least my rank and stature to stop you from throwing yourself upon Lady Reirin week after week. Defending both the Maidens themselves and the order of the inner court *is* my duty as the captain of the Eagle Eyes.”

“Excuse me? Don’t speak of me like I’m some beast before a slab of meat.”

That accusation was enough to make even Gyoumei stop in his tracks, his face going stiff. Nevertheless, he couldn’t bring himself to say, *How dare you imply I’d ever hurt a Maiden!* That was owed to the bitter regret he felt over sentencing his beloved to death over a misunderstanding, exiling her to a storehouse, and refusing to hear her pleas three times over. The whole ordeal had made him irrevocably aware of how much he still lacked as a man, and he knew full well that he was acting desperate enough to warrant the comparison to an animal.

Still, Shin-u was the last person he wanted to hear that from.

Just when did he start calling her “Lady Reirin,” anyway?

In the past, he had stood on ceremony and called each and every Maiden by her full name and title. Well, with the exception of Shu Keigetsu, around whom he forwent any semblance of formalities. However, by the time the book had closed on the whole body-switching incident, he had switched to calling her “Lady Reirin.” Gyoumei had refrained from pointing it out for fear of being too petty, but if he were to be honest, he wished Shin-u would keep the same professional distance he had back when he still called her “Lady Kou Reirin.”

Has he not noticed the way his lip twitches when he says her name?

His half brother almost never showed emotion on his face. Most people were intimidated by his frosty good looks, but Gyoumei had known the man long enough to notice the slightest changes in his expression. He could hear the heat in Shin-u’s voice whenever he said Reirin’s name, and he could see the passion in his gaze when he looked at her. It was nearly enough to make the prince ask which of them was the *real* starving beast. There was no question that Shin-u had been drawn to the glimpse at Reirin’s true nature he’d gotten through the swap.

The biggest headache of all was that Gyoumei could sympathize with both his Gen-like tendency to save all his emotions for the right person *and* his propensity to end up hopelessly attracted to whoever managed to take him by surprise. He was the same way, after all.

But that doesn’t make it my responsibility to help him understand it.

Shin-u was his precious little brother. He had always looked forward to cheering on his dead-eyed half sibling if ever he found himself wrapped around a woman's finger. But if he was going to become Gyoumei's *rival*, that changed things. It would be one thing if he were competing against some peasant, but Shin-u's status as the captain of the Eagle Eyes meant that he could be wed to the lowest-ranking consort, if he so desired.

Gyoumei bottled up his irritation and forced his refined features into a smile. "I appreciate your dedication to your job, but what I'm trying to say is that such dedication might be better spent elsewhere. If I were to suspect you of having designs on one of the Maidens gathered here for *me*, why, who could blame me?"

It was quite the immature admonition, if Gyoumei did say so himself. Still, there was nothing for it; he wasn't going to lose Reirin even if it meant looking like an ass in front of his half brother.

Shin-u blinked like he had no idea what the prince was talking about. "You think I have designs on one of the Maidens? The Maidens gathered here for *you*, Your Highness?"

Apparently, he really *hadn't* caught on to his own feelings.

Feeling something between exasperation and relief, Gyoumei gave a light shrug of his shoulders. "I know full well that it's not true, of course. I'm merely making the argument that it might look that way to someone else. It would behoove you to bear that in mind and—"

"I'm not certain what those 'designs' would be in the first place." Shin-u coolly cut off the prince's half-mediation attempt, half-warning. "The captain of the Eagle Eyes is the defender of the Maiden Court and its Maidens. I assumed it was part of my duty to protect the butterfly who was left to a storehouse and otherwise hurt by the very prince before me."

"..."

The genuine expression on Shin-u's face made it clear that he was simply speaking his mind, but that comment made for a sharper knife to the guilt-ridden Gyoumei's heart than any half-baked insult could have.

And you, Shin-u? If this really were about your duty as you so claim, wouldn't it be your job to dispose of any Maidens I, the crown prince, have chosen to cast aside? Can you not see the contradiction there?

Gyoumei and Shin-u stared each other down for some time, one man smiling and the other devoid of expression.

“Do you mean to tell me that you did anything to protect Reirin during the switch? Sure, if I recall, you *did* give her salt and ointment. Both are items you found in either the inner court kitchen or the Eagle Eyes' office, neither of which came out of your own pocket, but I suppose you want to brag that the gesture was worth its weight in gold?”

“Not at all. When it came down to it, I did nothing for her. But neither did I do anything *to* her.”

A chill swept through the summertime cloister. Both parties locked gazes for several long moments, but at last, Gyoumei turned away and resumed his stroll down the cloister. Shin-u was quick to follow suit.

It was a fact that neither one of them had managed to protect Reirin. Gyoumei was the worse of the two for having actively mistreated her, but it was *Reirin* who had been the first to notice the plot that had shaken up the inner court and put her own life on the line to stop it. All the men had done was clean up in the aftermath.

I'm only getting started. Just you watch. I'm going to make up for all my mistakes, Gyoumei told himself.

Knowing how badly he had slipped up made him determined to not repeat those mistakes. He would cast aside all his bullheadedness and shame and devote his all to his beloved. While he was at it, he'd learn to be a little more forgiving too. Refusing to reason with even the most bitter of his enemies could end up coming back to bite him once again. From that perspective, it was hard to bring himself to land a crushing blow on Shin-u.

“So what excuse—sorry, *pretext*—do you have for seeing Lady Reirin today?” Shin-u asked.

“‘Pretext’ doesn't sound any better, you know. Today I've come to give her a

scolding. My sources tell me that she's been staying up late into the night working on her embroidery, despite how chilly the weather has gotten in the mornings and evenings. While I'm at it, I plan to serve her a warming cup of tea under the garden pavilion. It's the prince's sacred duty to keep his Maidens in good health."

"A bit overprotective, aren't we? She would rather be allowed to devote herself to her hobbies as she pleases than have you dictate her every action, I imagine."

"And what do *you* know about Reirin? Her frailty is an immutable fact. When everyone else is so lenient on her, it's important there be at least one person willing to tell her off. It's for her own good."

It didn't matter to him if their philosophies were in conflict with one another. Because Gyoumei was so hell-bent on never seeing her hurt again, he was more determined than ever to keep Reirin under strict supervision; in contrast, because her freewheeling storehouse life was the strongest impression Shin-u had of her, he often advocated to let her stretch her wings. Of course, from an outsider's perspective, it looked just as much like he was subconsciously scheming to remove her from Gyoumei's custody so it would be easier for *him* to interact with her.

The two of them made their way down the cloister with the usual silent sparks flying, but when they at last made it to the Palace of the Golden Qilin and noticed a certain gamboge gold standing outside the gate, the pair exchanged glances. The woman stood straight at attention and bore a stern visage. It was Reirin's head court lady, Tousetsu.

When she spotted the pair approaching, she dropped to her knees in one fluid motion. "Greetings, Your Highness. Captain."

"Where's Reirin? She was supposed to meet me at the gate," Gyoumei said, getting a bad feeling about her unexplained absence.

His worst fears were confirmed when Tousetsu gave him a curt response that spoiled the sole bright spot of his day. "My apologies, Your Highness. I'm afraid Lady Reirin is not feeling up to a walk through the gardens today."

It would have been a perfectly plausible scenario for the sickly Reirin, were it

not for Kenshuu's shouts of "Whoa! That was a great strike, Reirin!" or the court ladies' jubilant cries of "What brilliant willpower, Lady Reirin!" coming from the palace behind Tousetsu.

This blatant case of feigned illness earned a frustrated twitch of Gyoumei's lips. "This has 'Mother' written all over it... She went on the attack to keep me from hogging Reirin two weeks in a row, eh?"

Incidentally, Shin-u had quietly averted his gaze with a smile.

With a sidelong glance at his catty half brother, Gyoumei cleared his throat and turned back to Tousetsu. "Step aside, Tousetsu. I made my plans first."

"Given her ailing health, recuperating in the Palace of the Golden Qilin is the most she can manage at the moment."

"Then let *me* come see her. It would seem to me that she's feeling well enough to be accepting visitors, no?" he quickly retorted.

"Her Majesty spoke thus," Tousetsu began, bringing out the empress's own words to shut him down: "'I have no use for a man who runs to his beloved in a panic when she falls ill. The man to whom I entrust my beloved niece should be a skilled enough warrior to ward off her malady, even without the Bow of Warding.'"

Caught off guard, Gyoumei gaped at her with wide eyes, as did Shin-u behind him. It was a natural reaction to being told *that* was the condition to marry the girl he was interested in. Both men fell silent.

Tousetsu took advantage of that short opening to continue on, "In hindsight, both of Lady Reirin's brothers are excellent archers. As it would be no exaggeration to say she was raised by the two of them, I have no doubt that skill with a bow is an essential criterion for who she considers to be 'a reliable man.'"

"What...?"

"..."

Both Gyoumei and Shin-u were lost for words. They had an appointment to be here. How had this ended in Kenshuu screening them based on their archery

skills?

“Hold on, Tousetsu. My plan is to serve Reirin a warming cup—”

“Come to think of it, as Lady Reirin worked on her embroidery late into the night yesterday, she said that she would love to present this sachet to the master archer with the strength to drive off her malady.”

Tousetsu reverently produced a sachet from the breast of her garment as though this bit of information had only just occurred to her. Gyoumei’s gaze was soon glued to the delicately embroidered item.

Any man would want to receive a sachet from his beloved. There had been more pressing concerns on the night of the Double Sevens Festival, of course, and he hadn’t intended to ask for one now that the window had passed, but it *had* weighed on the back of his mind.

Though not quite as overtly as Gyoumei, Shin-u likewise stared silently at the sachet from behind him—intrigued, perhaps. Never having been the materialistic sort, he was perplexed to find himself coveting something for the first time in a while.

“Now that the occasion has passed, it would be rude to present this as a gift for the Double Sevens Festival, but perhaps we could maintain the appearance of propriety if it were awarded to the winner of an archery competition. I’m sure Lady Reirin would be delighted to see this exquisite work of embroidery find its way into the hands of a worthy gentleman.”

Tousetsu cast a meaningful glance toward the two men. Feigning innocence, she went on, “Although there are plenty of gentlemen willing to rush to her side in times of sickness, there doesn’t appear to be anyone with the strength to ward off what ails her. Perhaps it was a meaningless suggestion.”

While it was overstepping her bounds as a court lady, that comment of hers lit a fire under the men. Both Shin-u and Gyoumei were bothered by how little they had contributed to resolving the series of incidents. Precisely *because* the pair was competent in most situations, the fact that they had been kept out of the loop and left Reirin and the girls to put their own lives on the line was a sore point for both of them.

“Alas, it would seem that Reirin isn’t feeling too well, and I couldn’t bear to force her on an outing under the circumstances. I haven’t had much time for exercise lately, so perhaps I’ll use the day to partake in an archery competition with some of the Eagle Eyes,” Gyomei rattled off in an unconvincing monotone following a long pause.

Shin-u was quick to add, “As the captain who oversees the archery range, I shall serve as your opponent. I’m sure your average Eagle Eye would provide no challenge for you, Your Highness.”

“Oh? Here I thought you didn’t want your training interrupted. There’s no particular need for *you* to step up.”

“You needn’t worry about that. To fit in breaks where appropriate and learn from watching someone else’s form is another part of training.”

Gazing out at the gate to the Palace of the Golden Qilin, the two men bantered back and forth with thin smiles on their faces. Before long, they spun on their heels in such perfect unison as to be a reminder of their brotherhood. As the duo marched off toward the archery range at an even faster pace than they had arrived, Tousetsu watched them go with a deep bow of her head.

“So what, pray tell, brings you to another clan’s storehouse so early in the morning?”

“I believe the hour of the dragon is a little too late to be considered ‘morning,’ Lady Keigetsu, and this is *not* the grounds of the Shu Palace but a common area much like the Maiden Court.”

It was some time after Gyomei and Shin-u had headed for the archery range.

As she happily thrust her hands into the sun-dappled garden, Reirin cast a purposeful glance over her shoulder at her exasperated friend. “The state of my little ones is always weighing on my mind. See this, Lady Keigetsu? These rapeseed shoots are supposed to come into season in early spring, but look at how lushly they’re growing! It’s truly a miracle. Should I boil them? Should I fry them? But since the oil is squeezed from rapeseed, it feels a little ironic—perhaps even sinful—to boil the greens in their own juices. Oh, what to do?”

“I wish you’d give a little more consideration to *my* feelings than the rapeseed’s,” Keigetsu mumbled. Despite the retort, she had already settled down in the shade of a large tree.

The curtness of her tone notwithstanding, she actually welcomed Reirin’s visit.

Though the pair had formed an odd friendship as a result of their switch, inside the Maiden Court, the two girls were nothing more than the Maidens of two different clans. With all the eyes on them, the pair had little opportunity to talk to one another. It was possible that Keigetsu had been waiting for a chance to indulge in a laid-back, no-stakes chat for quite some time now.

“Weren’t you supposed to join His Highness for a stroll around the gardens today? I get the feeling Lady Seika was gnashing her teeth when she saw you invited out for the umpteenth week in a row.”

“Yes, about that... Her Majesty turned His Highness away at the door after complaining that she wanted me to treasure my time with *her* too. I believe he should be off doing archery practice with the captain of the Eagle Eyes right about now.”

“Huh?!” Keigetsu shouted in surprise.

Any Maiden would long for a visit from the crown prince himself, and the empress had blocked him for a reason like *that*?

“It’s true that Her Majesty is a higher authority than His Highness here in the inner court, but why would she get in the way of one of your trysts? Doesn’t she want to see you prosper as a Maiden?”

“Of course. She instructs me how to become the best Maiden I can be, and she does generally defer to my appointments with His Highness...” A haggard smile rose to her face. “But seeing as His Highness has been sending me gifts and letters every few hours and coming by during my every waking hour in the Kou Palace—and that’s not to mention the visits the captain of the Eagle Eyes pays me in between—it’s true that I haven’t had much time to spend on her as of late...”

“Wow. Sounds rough.”

Under normal circumstances, this was the part where Keigetsu would burn with jealousy to see another clan's Maiden so well loved, but she truly did sympathize. After all, she knew firsthand from their switch that the graceful Maiden before her was in poor health almost twenty-four seven. It would be hard to rest either the body or the spirit when she was constantly surrounded by such intense admirers.

It's true that a thirst for love can kill, but I wonder if too much can drown a person too, Keigetsu thought as she gazed intently upon her friend.

Though perpetually showered with love, Reirin had always seemed detached from those around her. Keigetsu had once resented that attitude as arrogance, but she had ceased to see it that way. She'd learned that the girl had her hands full just trying to make it through each and every day, after all.

"No, it's not their fault... I'm undependable, and still I push myself in spite of that, so I understand why everyone can't help but worry... My only recourse is to build up my muscles and stamina and let the results speak for themselves..."

"Yeah?" Keigetsu brushed that off.

Sure, she didn't *hate* Reirin anymore, but neither were they close enough for Keigetsu to give her a crash course in emotional intelligence.

"So if she turned His Highness away, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be having tea with the empress?"

"Not a moment after His Highness left, she received a summons from His Majesty. From the sound of it, he wanted to have a one-on-one chat about something... Her Majesty stalked off to the main palace like a cat dreading a bath."

"Those two are such a weird couple. I can't tell if they actually get along or not," Keigetsu muttered, a conflicted look on her face. The consorts were supposed to covet their summons from the emperor even more than the Maidens did their trysts with the prince. You could tell Kenshuu was related to Reirin by the fact that she only seemed annoyed about it. "Well, whatever. So that's when you came to see me? What happened to Tousetsu?"

"Hee hee! I said I wanted to eat some ice cream to beat the hot weather, and

she rushed straight off to the kitchen. Now I can tend the vegetable garden to my heart's content!"

"Wow. That's quite the nasty streak you've got there."

Despite the sardonic smile on Keigetsu's face, she was breathing a sigh of relief deep down. Call her a demon or a mother-in-law, but Tousetsu loved to give Keigetsu vengeance-filled "lessons" whenever the two crossed paths. Keigetsu wasn't her biggest fan. At the same time—much to even her own surprise—her heart skipped a beat at the thought that Reirin had gone so far as to give her attendant the slip for the simple reason that Keigetsu didn't want to be around her.

"Even Tousetsu could use a break every now and then," said Reirin. "His Highness and the captain get to relax their minds and bodies with some archery practice, while Tousetsu can whip up some dessert for a change of pace. See? Everyone wins."

"Whatever you say. So what was that about the rapeseed—"

Just as Keigetsu had leaned toward the field with an amused smile, an incoming storm of footsteps interrupted their conversation. It was one of Keigetsu's high-ranking court ladies, Leelee, who had long since come to feel at home in her blazing scarlet robe. Judging by the sweat matting her red hair, she had rushed over in a hurry.

"Things are getting bad over at the archery range! You need to come *now*, Lady Reirin!"

"Getting bad? How?"

"His Highness and the captain have been shooting their bows alongside each other, there's a defeated heap of Eagle Eyes whose spirits have been broken by one too many unparalleled displays of skill, the court ladies who overheard the commotion have flooded the scene and steamed up the place, and the two sweat-slicked men both stripped down to their waists at the same time! It's pandemonium!"

Though there were a lot of key details missing from the explanation, her report still managed to evoke a very vivid image. From the sound of it, the

archery contest between the two lady-killers had whipped the whole inner court into a crucible of panic and excitement.

“‘Relax their minds and bodies with some archery practice,’ was it...?” Keigetsu muttered, narrowing her eyes into a squint.

Embarrassed, Reirin clutched her face between her hands. “Hrk... I wasn’t counting on *this*...”

“When I saw how competitive the two were getting and how intent they were on keeping at it, something told me this wasn’t any ordinary contest—or, more specifically, that there was something at stake. I went to the Palace of the Golden Qilin and asked Lady Tousetsu about it, and sure enough, she told me that those two were fighting over a sachet you made.”

“I’m impressed, Leelee! How did you manage to make the connection between their motives and the Kou Palace?”

“Who *wouldn’t* make the connection?!” Leelee shouted back on instinct. Quickly deeming that this wasn’t the time or place, she cleared her throat. She schooled her face into a solemn expression and stared straight at Reirin.

“Anyway, at the rate things are going, the women’s frenzy might lead to an accident. The other Eagle Eyes have tried to stop them, but the pair just keeps going at it, claiming they won’t stop until there’s a winner... Since both sides are equally matched, this is never going to end unless *you* come and decide who the winner is, Lady Reirin.”

Ever the faithful worker, Leelee grabbed Reirin by the arm and dragged her off to the archery range with Keigetsu in tow.

The creak of a bow being drawn echoed through the silent archery range. A beat later, the crowd erupted into cheers as the arrow hit the target with a heavy *thunk*.

“Goodness! He hit the target again!”

“How many in a row does that make?! That takes some incredible concentration.”

“And a lot of stamina too. Just how long have His Highness and the captain been drawing their bows now?”

Everyone in the vicinity was overwhelmed by the sight of Gyoumei and Shin-u occupying the range and drawing their bows again and again without end.

“Wow. This really is a big crowd...”

Reirin and the girls peeked out at the enthusiastic spectators from behind a cluster of bushes. There was a huge mass of people surrounding the archery range. Just as Leelee had worried, the heat from having so many people packed together under the blazing sun was intense. Every now and then a court lady would wobble on her feet when she was shoved aside, or an Eagle Eye would start a fight with another colleague who had stepped on his feet. If they wanted to stop the match, they were going to have to wade through that crowd first.

“This might pose quite the challenge,” said Reirin.

“Still... I can see why people keep flocking here...” came Keigetsu’s dazed mutter from beside her, drawing a blink from Reirin. Upon closer inspection, Keigetsu had slapped both hands over her mouth, a spellbound look upon her face. “What a manly sight they are...”

When Reirin followed her gaze and finally spotted the archers in the center of the action, Reirin had to nod her head in agreement. Two men stood at a distance from each other in the polished archery range: Gyoumei and Shin-u. Each held a bow, one boasting his regal good looks and the other a dead serious expression on his sharp, handsome features.

They had slipped out of their sleeves due to the oppressive heat, laying bare their well-toned chests and arms. Their eyes as they gazed straight ahead at the target were likewise dripping with sensuality. Everything from the faint sheen of sweat upon the nape of Gyoumei’s neck to the tight ponytail of Shin-u’s black hair served to fascinate the onlookers.

Even Leelee, the one who had brought Reirin there to quell the commotion, kept casting the occasional captivated glance in their direction and then slapping her flushed cheeks to resist some great temptation.

“Are you all right, girls? Your faces are bright red. Here, it’s a bit cooler in the

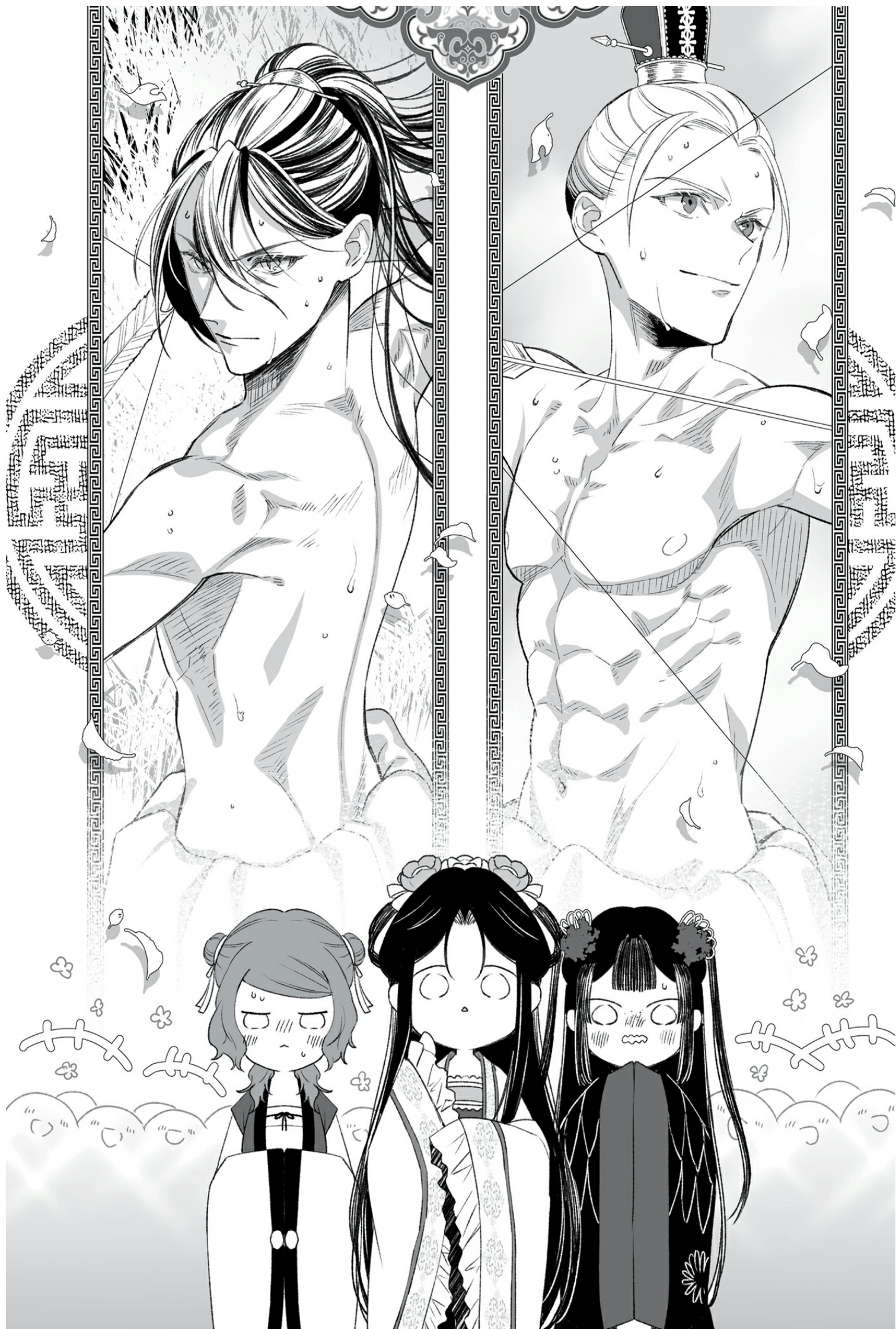
shade.” Growing concerned, Reirin traded places with the other two, letting them have her spot in the shade of a tree. “Um, shall I go bring us some cold water first? Your breathing is getting shallow. If you’re having a hard time, try squatting down and—”

“That’s not the problem! Are you telling me you don’t feel an ounce of desire watching this?!” Keigetsu snapped as Reirin shuffled her into the shade.

Reirin put a hand to her cheek, perplexed. “Of course I do. I would love to have muscles as toned as—”

“Not like *that*.” Keigetsu’s face twitched. “I mean, doesn’t the spellbinding sight of these two handsome men make your heart skip a beat?”

“If you’re referring to their state of undress, my archery-loving brothers used to practice like that all the time...” After flaunting her surprising resistance to the male form, Reirin flicked her gaze back to the two men standing in the archery range. “But it *is* a dazzling sight.”



The tension between Shin-u and Gyoumei was enough to send invisible sparks flying in the air, but their faces were full of life.

“It looks like they’re having fun,” she said with a soft smile.

She knew that Gyoumei spent his days pulling off an exhausting workload while bearing the heavy responsibility that came with being the crown prince. Despite his occasional displeasure with his own level of capabilities, it was that skill that gave him a strong sense of pride and responsibility in his princehood. The thought of him both taking a break from his duties and being blessed with an opponent whom he could go all out against brought a smile to her face.

Underneath his aloof appearance, Shin-u likewise had the air of someone who had given up on something. The blaze in his eyes as he took on a challenge was a new and refreshing sight.

Gyoumei and Shin-u were both taking this seriously. The sight of them giving their all to get their hands on something was both gallant and dignified.

“Let me hear what you have to say, Reirin!”

“An eagle never misses its prey. Don’t forget that.”

Reirin jolted as she abruptly recalled how each of them had come at her with such earnest expressions. She should have found it invigorating to see anyone desire something so keenly. Yet when *she* was the one on the receiving end of that passion, she wasn’t sure what to make of their powerful gazes.

“Doesn’t the spellbinding sight of these two handsome men make your heart skip a beat?”

Reirin frowned as she considered the question Keigetsu had asked with exasperation in her tone. With how much of her life she’d spent focused on just trying to survive, she didn’t quite understand what it was like to feel the heart skip a beat over something.

No, she understood affection. She’d been showered in enough of *that* to drown her in it. A warm, tender feeling that envelops a person whole—that was affection, and no doubt that was love too.

But...

Reirin thought back. She recalled Gyoumei's hands gripping her shoulders, or perhaps Shin-u's arm around her waist.

That felt hot.

Even she could tell how far off the mark that assessment was, but if she had to put a word to the feeling that arose in her heart during those moments, it would no doubt be something as simple as that. The feeling of their bare skin against hers went past a gentle sensation like "warmth" and felt shockingly scorching. The part of it that surprised her most of all was how raw the sensation had felt.

In hindsight, it was the first time she'd ever gotten so close to the opposite sex. Or, not quite—perhaps it was just the first time she'd ever registered another person so clearly. Her whole life until the switch, she'd thought she had never been exposed to anyone's naked emotion, but that might not have been the case. What she had learned from the swap was that those raw emotions had been there all along. Maybe *that* was the truth.

"Another bullseye! I can't believe it!" Keigetsu shouted in awe from beside her, snapping her back to her senses.

Shin-u had hit the target again. Gyoumei watched that with amusement, then knocked his next arrow as if the sight had further kindled his fighting spirit.

"We should watch how this plays out for a little while longer," Reirin murmured quietly, a smile still hanging on her lips.

"Oh? I mean—sure. They both seem to be enjoying themselves, and the crowd is orderly enough." Keigetsu gave a distracted reply, completely absorbed in watching the men's match.

Reirin giggled, then turned to Leelee beside her and asked, "Just in case, can you ask the culinary matron to prepare us a large jar of fruit-infused water? Once the match is finished, the whole crowd—the two competitors included, of course—will be able to hydrate themselves right away."

"Uh... Yes, ma'am!" Leelee looked over with a jolt and then took off like she was fleeing in shame.

As she watched her hardworking court lady leave, Reirin shielded her eyes

with her hands and looked up at the sky. The sun was finally nearing its zenith, and its rays shone down like arrows of light. Since she'd surrendered her spot in the shade to Keigetsu, she was feeling hot enough that she struggled to breathe.

But...everyone's having so much fun.

She could handle this much. Discreetly wiping the sweat that had begun to ooze from her pores, she went back to watching the two men in the archery range.

His Highness is holding out longer than I thought.

Lowering his bow, Shin-u cast a glance at his half brother as he picked out his next arrow. He had assumed that a competition between a military officer like himself and the crown prince always drowning in paperwork would be settled in no time, but the two were surprisingly evenly matched in their abilities. Between his tall stature brought about by his western blood and his overwhelming muscle, there was no shortage of power behind Shin-u's shots, but on the other hand, Gyoumei made use of his outstanding concentration and dedication to skillfully wield his bow.

Perhaps he had some work he couldn't put off—he would occasionally call one of his pages over and fire off some orders—but by the time he faced the target again, his concentration hadn't been disrupted in the slightest. It was impressive.

"I see the number of arrows left in your quiver is starting to dwindle. Since you seem to be so busy, Your Highness, why not make the next shot your last?" Shin-u proposed.

Since neither of them had missed the target even once, this was quickly becoming a contest of how close they could get to the bullseye. However, with how full the target was getting, one shaft would often strike where another already was—what's referred to as "telescoping" an arrow. The Eagle Eye who was supposed to be in charge of tallying their scores had long since abandoned the task with a glazed look in his eyes. Now that things had come to this, the mood was such that whoever shot even one more arrow than the other would

be deemed the winner.

Since Gyoumei understood that, he only lifted one eyebrow with a huff and responded, “Why should I be the first to finish up? *You* could call it quits.”

“No thanks,” Shin-u countered. “I haven’t spent even a third of my stamina yet.”

Gyoumei grinned. “What a coincidence. Me neither.”

It was clear from the way they were both sweating and slipping out of their sleeves that they were getting worn out, but one would never guess it from their attitudes.

“You seem awfully invested in this sachet for someone who’s always been so aloof and uninterested, Shin-u. Why won’t you back down?” Gyoumei said, quirking the corner of his mouth into a smirk as Shin-u grabbed yet another arrow.

He has a point.

Staring down at the arrow in his hand, Shin-u nodded along on the inside. The Eagle Eyes’ captain and the crown prince. A mere military officer and the future emperor. Considering their respective stations, it was only right for him to let Gyoumei have all the glory once he’d shot off his first few arrows. Even if he *did* have to keep up appearances as the head Eagle Eye, there was no reason he had to go so far as to beat the crown prince. Yet for some reason, he didn’t want to back down.

Do I want the sachet that badly? he asked himself, mystified by his own behavior.

There had been several times when women had shoved gifts onto him in the past, but he’d only ever found it a hassle. Food to fill his belly with was one thing, but a trinket good for nothing but smelling nice was of no use to him.

But...I want it, came his heart’s honest answer nonetheless.

He was dying to know. What kind of fragrance did it give off? What kind of scent would Reirin find pleasant enough to gift someone else? What cloth would she pick out, and how much painstaking work went into embroidering it?

And if he showed up before her wearing it on his person, what would her reaction be?

It's always hard to predict what she'll do.

The only time he'd been able to touch upon the true nature of the girl always kept under the strict custody of Gyoumei or the Kou Palace court ladies was during the switch. When he'd seen her up close and personal, she'd been an elusive woman who laughed with a twinkle in her eye, pulled off the most outrageous stunts, and sometimes even thrown down the gauntlet to him. The same Kou Reirin he'd always assumed was nothing but graceful had in fact been a bundle of surprises, and he was tempted to keep opening one new door after another.

Yet ever since the end of the switch, there had grown a polite distance between them as the captain of the Eagle Eyes and the top candidate for empress. He wanted to hold some tangible item in his hand—something made to last—that could transcend the gap between them.

He ended the conversation there and readied his bow. As he focused his attention, he felt the target drawing closer and closer. When he released his hand, the arrow whizzed straight ahead like it was being drawn in and struck the dead center of the target. A beat later, the crowd erupted into another round of cheers.

“Gosh! How dreamy!”

“That's the blood of a foreign slave for you.”

“He *is* His Highness's favorite. If he serves as the Eagle Eyes' captain for a few more years, he might eventually rise in the ranks to become a military strategist.”

Flirtatious squeals, words of disdain, and curious glances flew around. As usual, little else swirled around the inner court.

“Wow. This really is a big crowd...”

It was then that Shin-u heard a voice as clear as a bell in the distance and snapped his head to attention. His well-honed senses slipped past the buzz of the crowd and managed to pin down one specific person. In the shade of a

thicket a short distance away from the ring of spectators stood Kou Reirin.

She swapped places with Shu Keigetsu and the red-haired court lady beside her, then stepped out into a sunlit spot a little closer to the archery range. The rays of summer sunlight illuminated her smooth cheeks, giving her whole figure a beautiful glow.

“It looks like they’re having fun,” she said with a soft smile. She gave an order to her court lady, who then ran off to the palace. If he had to guess, she’d asked her to bring some sort of refreshment. That was the kind of woman she was, after all.

Reirin seemed to be spectating their archery competition with great enthusiasm. Each time he and Gyoumei took turns hitting the center of the target, out of the corner of his eye, Shin-u would catch a glimpse of her clasping her hands together with a look that could’ve been either admiration or envy.

Of course you don’t look spellbound—just impressed.

Amid all the women casting him enraptured glances, the way Reirin would sometimes stare at him hard enough to crease her brow reminded him so much of a warlord sizing up his enemies that a strange sense of amusement came over him.

Pretending he was checking the tension in his bowstring, Shin-u made a point of moving over to the edge of the range. He locked eyes with Reirin, plucked the string with his finger, and then playfully released it. Picking up on the fact that he was teasing her about breaking the Bow of Warding, she flushed a deep red. The sight of her clasping her cheeks between her hands and moaning in embarrassment brought a grin to his face.

“What’s wrong? You’re smiling.” When Shin-u returned to his position with a smile still lingering on his lips, Gyoumei shot him a glance from where he held his own bow beside him. “Are you finally starting to lose focus? You’re free to quit any time, you know. But if you do...”

He straightened his posture, then shot a gorgeous arrow in one smooth gesture.

Thunk!

Another hit.

“You won’t get Reirin’s sachet,” he finished, turning around and flashing Shin-u a taunting smile.

Shin-u took that in silence, then mulled over the thoughts in his head. What was he supposed to do in a situation like this?

His Highness is concerned with Lady Kou Reirin’s movements above all else. As the captain of the Eagle Eyes, I should naturally announce her arrival.

To put a finer point on it, he ought to throw the match. He ought to let the crown prince look dashing in front of his beloved Maiden. He ought to please Gyomei with the news of Kou Reirin’s arrival, let him win, and serve as the prince’s foil. No doubt that was the right thing to do as his half brother too.

But...

He picked out his next arrow and turned to the target. When he saw Shin-u brimming with more focus than ever, Gyomei gave a small gulp from beside him.

Creaaak...

Shin-u nocked his arrow with a dull sound. His sharp, eagle-like eyes stared down the target. He sensed the distance between him and the mark begin to shrink. His prey was right before his eyes.

This is my prey.

Despite carrying the blood of the emperor in his veins, he had always been scorned as the son of a slave. Ever since he was born, no one had known what to do with him. All that had buzzed around him were curious glances, appraising looks, or flirtatious smiles. He’d never been allowed to want much, nor had he felt the desire to. Thus, it was without any particular envy that he’d always gazed upon his half brother who was blessed with everything. Even so...

I want it.

This was a hunt. If he saw an appealing prey before him and held a weapon in his hand, he would naturally find himself reaching for it. He could figure out what exactly that prey meant to him *after* he’d hunted it.

That's right. Any prey I set my eyes on...

He used his height to his advantage to pull the string as far back as he could, then stared down the target with a gaze as sharp as an eagle's. When he released his hand, the arrow tore through the air at a tremendous speed.

Thunk!

With a dull sound, the shaft pierced the feathers of an arrow already jammed in the bullseye.

...I will fell for sure.

"That's a harrowing amount of concentration," Gyoumei remarked, the look on his face somewhere between impressed and exasperated. "Once you find yourself absorbed in something, you're the sort who can't see anything else around him, I see. Do be careful not to neglect your duties as captain."

"Surely you jest," Shin-u shot back, a bit miffed. "I'd say I'm paying more attention to my surroundings than you are, Your Highness. Haven't you noticed that Lady Reirin has been watching us from those bushes this whole time?"

"Excuse me?" As soon as it was pointed out to him, Gyoumei whipped around and looked in that direction. When he saw for himself that Reirin was indeed standing there, his eyes went wide. "Hey, Shin-u. How long has she been watching us?"

"About half an hour, I'd say. She even clapped for us a few times. Not that you noticed at all."

"What...?" Gyoumei frowned.

Shin-u had been waiting for the prince to grow incensed and try harder than ever to hand him a defeat, but he did something unexpected instead: He just heaved a big, disappointed sigh.

"That's enough archery for one day. You can have the satchet."

What's more, he casually shoved his bow into the hands of his page and made to leave the range.

"Your Highness?" Shin-u called out to him in surprise.

Gyoumei straightened out his robe, then glanced back at him over his shoulder. “Fool. She’s no Eagle Eye—this is a frail girl like Reirin we’re talking about. What good reason is there to keep her standing outside in the blazing sun?” His tone was almost that of an older brother admonishing his little sibling for getting too carried away.

Alarmed, Shin-u watched without a word as Gyoumei cut through the sea of people and hurried toward the bushes.

“Oh? What happened? His Highness gave up all of a sudden,” Keigetsu commented with a puzzled tilt of her head.

When Reirin tried to respond, she realized just how dry her mouth was. Her head was all fogged, and she felt dizzy.

This is bad...

The sunlight appeared to be beating down stronger than she’d thought. Either that, or even the little bit of playing in the dirt she’d done before coming here had been a bad idea in her current body. With the familiar sensation of a fainting spell creeping up on her, Reirin fought to regain her footing. If she passed out in a graceless heap, there would be no point in her having shown up in the first place. Leelee would make another big fuss, it would be even worse if word got around to Tousetsu, and she’d be making trouble for Keigetsu too.

I’ve been doing so well lately that I got a little carried away.

Ever since the switch, Reirin had been in generally good health and ran relatively few fevers. Perhaps this was because the rest of the malicious qi inside her had disappeared with the venomcraft when it was purged, or perhaps it was because the earth-enhancing fire qi—that is, Keigetsu’s soul—had had some beneficial effects on Reirin’s body. Whatever the case, it had caused her to let down her guard a little.

I need to...control my breathing... Perhaps I’ll crouch down for a bit. Steady now...

The moment she became aware of the discomfort she felt, it ballooned inside of her. Her face hardened with tension in spite of herself. Nevertheless, Reirin

made a conscious effort to let go of her nerves and smile.

She was Kou Reirin, Maiden of the clan that reigned over the unshakable earth. She knew that one wrong step would see her appearance that had been praised as delicate instead criticized as frail. Though everyone there was kind, she knew that the Maiden Court was a place where showing even the slightest bit of weakness would see one dragged to rock bottom. Above all else, she feared that collapsing too often might worry those closest to her.

“Oh gosh... His Highness is coming this way!” Keigetsu whispered in a flurry of excitement, but Reirin’s brain couldn’t process the meaning of the words she was saying.

The best Reirin could manage was standing there bathed in a clammy sweat. She could feel the buzz of the crowd around her, but the noises felt so distant.

“Hello there. Did you come to steal a glimpse of a man’s bare chest, my little butterfly?”

When a familiar voice dropped down from overhead, Reirin lifted her head in a daze. Her vision was flickering too much to make out his face.

“Your...Highness...” Reirin muttered in fragments.

“It looks like you’ve had a little too much excitement. What’s more, a Maiden shouldn’t be looking at the naked body of any man other than me.” Gyoumei covered her eyes playfully, then lifted her up in his arms. “Perhaps it’s time to kidnap my Maiden before she sees anything too indecent.”

With that, he turned back to the Palace of the Golden Qilin at a brisk pace. Everyone around watched what looked almost like a fit of jealousy from the prince with a mix of warmth and envy. Not a single person present noticed that Reirin had almost done the disgrace of passing out in front of a huge crowd.

“Your...Highness... I’m sorry... I—”

“The heat was too hard on you, wasn’t it? Really now, why would you stand out in the sun for so long?”

“You both...seemed to be having such fun...that I wanted to keep watching...”

“Fool. I’d show you that any time you want,” Gyoumei scolded Reirin in

hushed tones on their way to the Palace of the Golden Qilin, keeping her tucked in his arms. “I was already worried you might fall ill if you got too absorbed in your training with Mother. I told one of my pages to have fruit-infused water and ice delivered to the Kou Palace, so drink up and get some rest.”

Worse yet, he’d even made arrangements for her while he was busy drawing his bow. Reirin’s eyes watered with shame. “Hrk... I’m so sorry for everything.”

When Reirin buried her head in his chest in embarrassment, an amused huff came from above. Upon casting a hesitant glance upward, she found Gyoumei looking down at her with a tickled expression.

“Don’t worry about it. Let me take care of you when I can.”

“Your Highness...”

His gentle voice eased the tension gripping her heart. As she relaxed, she felt the strength leave her arms and legs. Now that she was in his arms, it was going to be all right.

“I have something to tell you, Your Highness.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“I’m going to pass out now.”

“You what?!” he boggled.

Feeling the strength of Gyoumei’s arms around her, Reirin’s consciousness faded into darkness.

An exaggerated sigh echoed through a certain room in the Palace of the Golden Qilin: Reirin’s elegantly tidied chambers.

“Good grief. Who would have guessed you’d end up fainting before you even got to play with me at all? What a day.”

The voice belonged to Kenshuu.

Leaning forward in her chair with her face fixed into a pout, she poked her niece’s cheek where she lay in bed. “Serves you right for getting carried away.”

Despite the sulk in her tone, she used that fingertip to casually check Reirin’s

temperature and breathing rate in the process. It seemed her fever was a mild case stemming from fatigue, so her breathing had already stabilized and she was merely deep in sleep. Once Kenshoo was positive that was the case, she slumped back into her chair. From where she was sitting, she stared down at her niece's face.

“You grow more beautiful with each passing day.”

The slumbering Reirin looked just like Kenshoo's little sister.

“You're the spitting image of Seishoo—your face, your frail constitution, and the way you get everyone wrapped around your finger. It's the blood of a villainess, no doubt.”

Her mouth twisting into a smirk, she tore her gaze from her niece. When her eyes happened to land upon the display shelf and she saw the sachet that had been the root of the whole fiasco still sitting there, the rueful smile on her face grew wider.

Despite being deemed the winner after Gyoumei had withdrawn from the match, Shin-u had declined to accept his reward. Nevertheless, when he came to the Kou Palace to return the sachet, he'd looked at the slumbering Reirin with more passion than ever before. Those blue eyes that were known for their chill had instead been filled with regret—and thirst.

“Perhaps I should have let that sleeping dog lie. Just when Gyoumei stepped up to the plate too... I've done that boy a disservice.”

Kenshoo rose to her feet with a grunt, then reached for the sachet on the shelf. The exquisitely embroidered item had a pungent, invigorating aroma, nothing like the delicate scents Reirin had favored in the past.

“As classy as ever, I see. Still...your tastes have changed a little, eh?” she murmured, then looked back up from the sachet.

She gazed quietly upon her niece, who had settled into the peaceful, rhythmic breathing of sleep. Reirin had slowly but surely begun to break out of her shell ever since the switch.

“Say, Reirin. This was the first time you ever passed out in front of a crowd as ‘Kou Reirin.’ Why did you push yourself so hard? You used to be more prudent

than that.”

Still gripping the sachet, Kenshuu placed her hand on the bed and leaned in closer. With her free hand, she gently brushed Reirin’s bangs from her face.

“You had given up on everything. You had been too desperate to keep up appearances to do the things you wanted to do. You would accept other people’s invitations with a smile, but you never got close to anyone or desired anything of your own accord.”

Reirin had always sat somewhere high out of reach. Now the same Maiden who was supposed to slip through people’s fingers like a butterfly and float high overhead was flying a little bit closer to the ground. She was encountering all sorts of raw emotion and feeling herself shaken up. She was learning to get impatient, sometimes angry, and even a little greedy.

If she came to reach out her own hand to those around her—no matter how hesitantly—those people would fall even more deeply in love with her than they already were. Reirin herself would learn of friendship and love and come to enjoy life from the bottom of her heart.

“Don’t get too vivacious, Reirin.”

Narrowing her gaze, Kenshuu slid the hand that had been stroking her niece’s forehead away. The next thing those fingers bedecked with extravagant rings brushed against was Reirin’s slender neck.

“Otherwise, I...”

She then spread her fingers to cover the girl’s whole throat. Her grip had no force, however. Kenshuu only stood there quietly for a moment, then abruptly pulled her hand away as though she’d grown bored.

The empress plopped back down in her chair and slumped slovenly against its back. Upon glancing down at the sachet still in her hand, she tossed it into the air and caught it by the string. Then, she took to swinging it around.

“Looks like the sachet went unclaimed in the end. Nothing for it—I suppose I’ll have to let those overzealous nephews of mine have it. They’re going to be so overjoyed that I bet it’ll end up on display in the mausoleum for a while.”

Kenshū's thoughts spun around in time with the sachet, traveling to Reirin's two brothers. Those two overzealous nephews of hers were so doting and overprotective that they sometimes managed to put even Gyoumei to shame.

"To think this year's Harvest Festival is going to be held in the southern territory, of all places. I wonder if leaving those two to guard Reirin will bring fortune or disaster..." she murmured, her brow furrowing.

The reason the emperor had called her away earlier had been to inform her of that very Harvest Festival.

Way to ruin all my big plans.

Kenshū put a little too much strength into her fingers, causing the string to slip through her grip and sending the sachet flying.

"Whoops," she said, raising an eyebrow as she watched it happen. "I guess the answer is 'disaster.'"

The sachet was strewn over the floor, embroidered side down.

Extra Story: A Christmas Memory

“‘CHRISTMAS,’ is it?”

It was a certain midwinter day at the Kou clan estate. Kenshoo’s position as the empress hadn’t kept her from rushing back to her old home to see her niece, who would be turning eleven with the new year. Reirin gave a blank tilt of her head as her aunt thrust a painting before her with a look of smug satisfaction.

“That’s right. It’s what the kingdoms to the west call this celebration held right before New Year’s Eve—a thanks to the heavens for seeing them through the year safe and sound. His Majesty brought me this painting depicting a Christmas scene as a souvenir from one of his travels. It was so gorgeous that I just had to come show it off to you.”

“How sweet, Aunt Kenshoo! Thank you very much,” Reirin said with a soft laugh, traces of childishness still lingering in her voice. Kenshoo softened her gaze, seeing vestiges of the sister once hailed for her beauty in the girl’s countenance.

Kou Reirin was the crown jewel of her clan. Her demeanor was gentle, and she was a full-fledged beauty despite her young age.

Rather than let her incredible talent in the four arts go to her head, she remained ever diligent in her studies and was never seen without a lovely smile on her face. Everyone of the Kou clan adored her, and Empress Kenshoo was no exception. As her self-appointed guardian, Kenshoo even made the occasional trip to the Kou clan estate to bring her gifts or provide instruction on any manner of subjects.

“See this big tree with the star on top? I’m told it’s imbued with a divine power. Everyone adorns their room with one of these for the duration of the festivities. I thought it might be fun to emulate the tradition, so I arranged to have a tree delivered to your room as a little homecoming present. Decorate it

all you like later.”

Given the fortunes at her disposal, Kenshoo tended to go all out in her choice of souvenirs.

“Goodness! How kind of you. Did you have it imported all the way from the West...?”

“Nah. That wouldn’t have made it in time. I figured any kind of needled tree would do the trick, so I picked out a regular old pine.”

But her attention to detail left something to be desired.

“I ordered a batch of red and white rice cakes for the decorations too. Go ahead and stab those into the branches.”

“Wow! That sounds so festive. Perfect for a New Year’s celebration! You’re the best, Aunt Kenshoo.”

Kenshoo’s habit for cutting corners had ended up changing the whole motif, but that didn’t stop Reirin’s eyes from sparkling.

“Listen here, Reirin: Tonight, be sure to tie a white slip of paper to one of the tree’s branches and get to bed early. Do that, and a good girl like you might just find a wonderful gift under her tree come morning.”

“Really?!”

“Mm-hmm. I heard that San Ta...what’s-his-name...anyway, a sage dressed in a red robe delivers gifts to all the good children. I was intrigued by the story, so I got in touch with this Crimson-Clad Elder behind closed doors. He told me he’d ride his deer all the way through the night sky to come bring you a present.”

Despite the struggle to recall his name, this was an honest effort on Kenshoo’s part to let her niece have a nice dream.

“My!” the innocent Reirin exclaimed, her eyes aglimmer with joy. But when her expression clouded over a moment later, she ventured to ask, “You said *good* children get gifts? Then what happens to the bad children, Aunt Kenshoo?”

“Hm?”

“You’ve always taught me that the forces of good and evil, yin and yang, and luck and misfortune are two sides of the same coin—that one cannot exist without the other. If the good children receive gifts, surely something must happen to the bad children in exchange,” declared Reirin, a spark of intelligence in her gaze and a solemn look upon her face.

“True.” Kenshuu nodded with a completely straight face. She always *did* have a knack for playing along with kids. It also didn’t hurt that she was pleased to see her teachings had taken such firm root in the girl’s mind. “I’ll bet he goes around sizing up each and every child, shouting, ‘Are there any naughty children around?!’ And once the sage happens upon a no-good brat, he transforms into an evil demon and snatches them up into the night.”

Now this Crimson-Clad Elder was taking on elements of an Eastern demon of legend.

A gullible girl, Reirin’s round eyes swam with fearful tears. She squeaked out, “In that case, I fear I may be carried off by this Crimson-Clad Elder, Aunt Kenshuu.”

“You what?”

“The truth is...yesterday, my brothers taught me how to play pitch-pot after claiming it was the best game to improve one’s focus, and I got a little too into it. We had agreed to stop playing after an hour, but I snuck in a bit more practice once they’d left.”

Pitch-pot was originally invented as a party game. Players attempted to toss arrows into a pot set out at a distance, and those who missed their shot were forced to take a penalty drink. Though Kenshuu bit down an exasperated sigh upon hearing that her nephews had taught their little sister a drinking game, as a lover of repetitive and straightforward tasks, Reirin seemed to have taken a shine to it as a method of training.

“The arrowhead makes such a beautiful sound when it hits the center of the pot’s bottom. Whistling arrows and broadhead arrows strike unique notes of their own too. I got so absorbed in throwing them that before I realized it, dusk had fallen...” Ashamed, Reirin buried her face in her hands. “And when I checked the bottom of the pot, I found that I’d made a dent in Father’s precious

jar...”

“Whoa!” said Kenshuu, who had moved past disappointment and was slapping her knee in admiration.

The Kou clan had a shared love of hard work and backbone. When she heard that her niece had thrown enough arrows to gouge out the bottom of a rock-solid pot, the only thing Kenshuu felt was impressed.

“I know. I can’t believe myself either. Father took the trouble of having a famous potter make it, and I went and damaged it...”

“Don’t be a fool! That’s not damage; that’s proof of your determination. Your backbone smashed through the clay and materialized in the form of a scratch, that’s all. Don’t let it get you down.” Kenshuu gave a passionate speech in line with her bizarre worldview, but when she saw that had done little to lift Reirin’s spirits, she changed her line of defense. “Besides, what’s a little scratch on a jar? Take your brothers, for example. Those little rascals have been tearing down blinds, breaking beds, and knocking down pillars ever since they were kids. If the Crimson-Clad Elder came to take anyone away, it’d be those two for sure.”

“Huh?” Reirin gasped. Still, it had at least gotten her to lift her face, so Kenshuu took that as a win.

“But forget that. A good girl like you is sure to receive a wonderful gift. Not that I know what it’s going to be, of course! I just know it’s going to be something good. Now, get yourself to bed early and sleep without a care in the world.”

“...”

Though Reirin still looked to be deep in thought, Kenshuu forced the conversation to a neat end and left the room.

Night fell.

Despite the harsh cold outside, a certain young man snuck through the back gate of the Kou clan estate without so much as a candle to light his way. His

breath forming white puffs in the air, he asked his mother, “Why must I play the role of the Crimson-Clad Elder?”

“It wouldn’t pack the same punch if a woman played the part of a sage.”

It was the adolescent Gyoumei, whose mother had forced him to dress up in a crimson robe. No, perhaps “adolescent” wasn’t quite correct—though he would be turning only sixteen with the new year, he had long since grown into an imposing young man who boasted the regal bearing of a crown prince.

As a member of the imperial family, he was going to be swamped with official business until the end of the year. Amid that heavy workload, his mother had dragged him off to the Kou estate while insisting it would be “just for tonight” and then forced him to stand out in the cloister without even allowing him through the front gate.

“It’s important to have a dash of some late-night fun every now and then. When the Maiden Court opens in just a few more years, you’ll have to split your affections between five different women. Don’t waste the chance to spend as much time with your sweetheart as your heart desires.”

“My ‘sweetheart’? Reirin is only ten,” Gyoumei mumbled awkwardly.

Kenshuu met that with a smirk. “You *do* like her, though.”

There wasn’t a single Kou who didn’t know that Reirin had captivated Gyoumei with her dance when he and his mother visited for the Tomb-Sweeping Festival earlier that year. Though he had sent Reirin letters and gifts at every opportunity since then, Kenshuu was growing concerned that their relationship didn’t seem to be progressing at all.

“Young and cute as she is, Reirin never shows any weakness or vulnerability. I’ll bet the only chance to see her true face is when she’s asleep,” said Kenshuu, expressing her concern for Reirin as her aunt.

Gyoumei quietly glanced at his mother. Eventually, he took a deep breath, wrapped the red robe more firmly around himself, and began his walk down the cloister. The chill of the floor crept up his feet, which he’d left bare so as not to make too much sound.

“Listen. I’ll be hiding on this side of the partition. You sneak around the pine

tree and place the rouge under the white slip,” Kenshuu went on in a whisper. “If she’s still fast asleep, give her a light poke to wake her up as you’re leaving. The first thing her bleary eyes see will be the hem of your red robe and the sound of the bells I ri—”

“Yes, Mother, that’s quite enough,” Gyoumei cut her off. “I must have heard this a dozen times now.”

Once he’d managed to shut his mother up, he carefully set foot into the room where Reirin slumbered.

No matter how young she may be, it feels wrong to sneak into a sleeping girl’s room...

Despite his conflicted feelings about the whole venture, it was true that he wanted a peek at Reirin’s sleeping face. Given that Gyoumei had never seen a woman do anything but stare at him entranced, he found his cousin’s perfect control over her emotions to be both intriguing and vexing at the same time.

She was his wise cousin, one who always wore that frightfully mature smile. Would she make the unguarded face of a ten-year-old girl in her sleep, if nothing else?

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Alas, Gyoumei was alarmed to find that the girl in the bed was *not* lying down but sitting straight at attention.

She’s awake?!

No, worse—for some reason, she was clutching a dagger in front of her chest. The composition of the white robe she was wearing as a nightgown and the gigantic pine tree in the background gave her a ghastly enough aspect to make Gyoumei’s face freeze in horror.

“Hello, Crimson-Clad Elder. I take it you’ve used my tree as a guide to come kidnap my two brothers. B-but...I won’t let you have them!”

“I don’t want them!” he shouted back on impulse, uncertain how the conversation had taken this turn.

Her eyes suddenly going wide, Reirin tilted her head to one side. “Huh? Is that

you, dear cousin...?”

It seemed Gyoumei’s voice had given him away.

“This isn’t good, Gyoumei!” came a whisper from behind him. When he cast a glance backward, Kenshuu gave him a sharp order from her hiding place behind the partition. “Talk your way out of it!”

How?!

Mothers sure did love to demand the impossible.

“What are you doing here, dear cousin?” murmured Reirin, looking mystified.

On the spur of the moment, Gyoumei replied, “I-I am the Crimson-Clad Elder, little one! I’m merely borrowing this man’s body for the moment.”

“Pfft!” Kenshuu sputtered behind him, clenching her teeth in an attempt to ride out a wave of laughter. Unable to stop herself from shaking with mirth, the bell she was holding gave a small tinkle.

“I-Is that right? And what about that bell...?”

“That was one of my deer. They wear bells around their necks,” he answered in an all-or-nothing bid to push through.

Reirin nodded back, apparently satisfied with his explanation. “I see. I’m surprised to hear that you can use magic to steal bodies... But it’s true that it would be easier for you to infiltrate the estate in His Highness’s form than that of an old foreigner. Even if you were to get caught, the clan would be hard-pressed to apprehend you like this.”

The girl’s reasons for buying said explanation were oddly pragmatic.

Her brow furrowing with concern, Reirin went on, “But to control a member of the imperial family would be considered a grave crime in this kingdom. I realize you have your own way of doing things, but please consider departing from that body as soon as possible.”

“Uh, right.”

“My dear cousin’s body is an object of reverence here in the Kingdom of Ei. It would be terrible if he caught a cold because you took him out on such a cold

night.”

Gyoumei was touched to see Reirin so concerned for him. Between how funny it was that she had completely bought into his Crimson-Clad Elder act and how adorable it was that she worried about things like his looming punishment or physical health, he came dangerously close to cracking a smile.

Deciding that he had no choice but to see this through, Gyoumei cleared his throat. “Perhaps so. Once my business is done, I shall leave here posthaste. Kou Reirin, you are a pure soul whose daily conduct is beyond reproach. In recognition of your exemplary behavior, I hereby bestow upon you a token of my esteem.”

“Th-that’s quite all right! I don’t need anything. What about my brothers? You steal naughty children in the night, don’t you?”

It was as ridiculous as it was adorable that Reirin held not a scrap of interest in the shell of rouge in his hand, concerned only with the fate of her two brothers. Gyoumei had to avert his gaze in an effort to keep himself from bursting into laughter.

“Those two are hopeless louts, to be certain, but they have shown promise with their faithful service to the owner of this body over the past few years. On the condition that they remain loyal to the crown prince henceforth, I shall forgo their punishment for the evening.”

“Thank goodness! I’ll be sure to let them know!”

“Good.”

Gyoumei nodded and stroked his chin, which doubled as an excuse to hide the smile creeping over his face. Yet another jingle came from behind the partition. The bottom line was that this lovely little lady was beloved by anyone with ties to the Kou clan.

“Then I shall take my leave before this body catches a cold. Here, Kou Reirin. Have this rouge as your reward for being such a good girl.”

“Um... But I’m not in a position to accept such a wonderful present...”

When he thrust the gift before her once more, Reirin attempted to decline his

generosity. Gyoumei made a grab for her hand and pressed the shell into her tiny palm.

“You *are* worthy of this gift, Kou Reirin.”

“Erm...”

“Don’t hesitate. You can show a little less reserve—both when it comes to letting your emotions show and when it comes to accepting the goodwill of others.”

While he was at it, he told her the very thing that had been weighing on his mind since they first met. Reirin was smart. She had a strong backbone too—to the point that she always wore a smile on her face so as not to worry the people around her. But whenever they saw that strength that was the opposite side of the coin of her frailty, Gyoumei and the others couldn’t help but think, *She should show less reserve. She should hesitate less. She should allow others a glimpse of her moments of weakness or disgrace.*

“Take it.”

“Um... Thank you...” She timidly reached out to take the rouge.

With a satisfied nod, Gyoumei turned on his heel. “Farewell.”

“Wait!” Reirin called him to a stop, thrusting herself forward. She took a certain something out of a chest under her bed and then held it out to Gyoumei. “If you’d like, please accept this gift.”

“What’s this? A neck warmer?”

“Yes. Since I heard you would be coming at night, I thought you might be cold. Thus, I prepared this as a bribe—*ahem*, a welcome gift.”

Fearing for her brothers’ abduction, it seemed Reirin had prepared two different strategies: fighting him off with a dagger or winning him over with gifts.

“I’ve packed this bag with a small amount of charcoal and kindling to keep you warm, so please take it with you. I also have some dried boiled rice that’s easy to eat on the go, kudzu root extract to help fight off colds, a heated stone...” Burlap bags tied with color-coded strings came out of the chest one

after the other. “And take these potatoes for your deer.”

“Even the deer get something?” Gyoumei couldn’t help but mutter as she took the bag stuffed with potatoes. Perhaps it was the logic of “if you want to shoot the general, first shoot his horse.”

Before he knew it, Gyoumei had found himself with both hands full of luggage, but he wasn’t about to flounder in front of Reirin. He held the hefty collection of bags in his arms and left the room with the most unhurried gait he could manage.

“Get to sleep soon.”

“I will. Take care on your way home, Crimson-Clad Elder,” he heard from behind him.

“‘I’m merely...borrowing this man’s body’... Ha ha!”

“Stop laughing already, Mother.”

Gyoumei was sulking. By the time he’d made it back to the guest room, Kenshuu was *still* shaking with laughter.

“You caused this mess in the first place. Don’t laugh at me for working around your slipshod setup.”

“But come on! No...you’re right. It was my fault. Forgive me.” Kenshuu finally stopped laughing, wiping the tears of mirth from her eyes. “Still, who would have expected Reirin to prepare so many ‘bribes’ in such a short amount of time?”

“It must be a sign of how frantic she was. Her combination of gullibility and a knack for planning yielded some amusing results, I will say that.”

Gyoumei set the burlap bags on the floor, breaking into a smile as he stared down at them.

“I’ll return the potatoes and charcoal to the kitchen,” said Kenshuu. “She’s a smart girl, though. I’ll bet she counted up the number of potatoes. When she checks our stock tomorrow, the truth will be out.”

“You have a point...”

Gyoumei’s eyes settled on the pile of potatoes. After a moment’s thought, he picked one up in his hand.

“If he came from the west, it’d be that wall...”

Upon casting a glance at the wall visible through the window, he took a bite out of the raw potato for some unknown reason.

“Hey, Gyoumei? What are you doing?”

“You know how she is. Tomorrow she’s going to look for traces of his arrival to see if the Crimson-Clad Elder really came riding on a deer. Be sure to tell the other family members not to let her go up on the roof.”

With that, he tossed the potato out the window. It landed squarely on one of the tiles of the wall, making it look just like the spilled leftovers of a flying deer.

“I’ll take the remaining potatoes and charcoal home with me.” Gyoumei broke into an awkward, lopsided smile. “It’s a shame, but I won’t be able to wear this neck warmer in front of Reirin.”

Kenshuu let out an impressed sigh. “Wow...”

Gyoumei curtly silenced her before she could make fun of him. “I know how foolish I’m being, but please don’t say anything.”

“Oh, no. Your mother’s quite impressed.” In a rare occurrence, Kenshuu treated her son to a tender smile. “This must be your Kou blood in action. I must admit, I find this sillier version of you a good deal more loveable than your pretentious, crafty old self.”

“Could you refrain from casually undermining your own son’s efforts to behave like the ideal crown prince?”

“Ha ha! Sorry about that.”

Kenshuu’s cheerful laughter melted away into the midnight air around them.

The winter stars twinkling in the sky shone their faint light upon the world below, illuminating both the room where Kenshuu and Gyoumei shared a laugh and the room where Reirin slept with a shell clutched tightly to her chest.

“I just can’t accept this!”

The voice came from the storehouse in the fringes of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. As she was harvesting potatoes and sweating under the beating sun, Leelee spun around toward her mistress behind her.

“You’re a *Maiden*, milady! It’s the day before the Ghost Festival, when all the other girls are sure to be focused on taking care of their complexions! Why are *we* busy digging up potatoes?”

“Now, now, Leelee. Isn’t it great to be blessed with such sustenance that we have to harvest our crops in a hurry?”

“That’s not the issue! My point is that it’s wrong for a Maiden and her court lady to be tending the fields in the first place!”

It was little wonder that Leelee was upset. Following her exile, “Shu Keigetsu” had been forced to live a life of inconvenience in the storehouse. Leelee was her only attendant, and she had to provide for herself in all respects, from clothing to food.

“I’ve gotten so used to it that I forgot to comment for a while, but isn’t this messed up? Wouldn’t you say this punishment is overkill? Surely His Highness *must* know what’s going on here. Why doesn’t he step in? I bet his reputation for being kind and fair was all a big lie!”

“Leelee! Don’t be disrespectful.” It was in the nature of the Shu clan to let emotion trump all. Shu Keigetsu—currently inhabited by Kou Reirin—gently admonished her court lady for blaspheming the prince in her anger. “As the crown prince, His Highness must be an impartial leader to the Maidens of the court. He mustn’t pardon the culprit who kicked up such a fuss over a fleeting moment of sympathy.”

“But even if it *is* about maintaining order...this is too much. I’ll acknowledge that he’s a man of strict order, but he’s also a cold one.” Despite softening her tone after the scolding, Leelee’s mouth still twisted into a dissatisfied pout.

Upon hearing that, Reirin dropped her gaze to the potato in her hand and giggled. “That’s not true at all, Leelee.” Then, for some reason, she lovingly

stroked the mud-covered spud. “His Highness has to keep a tight lid on his emotions to fulfill his duties as crown prince, that’s all. The truth is, he’s a very kind and compassionate person deep down.”

“You...think so?”

“Yes. Oh, that reminds me, Leelee!” Reirin suddenly said as her attendant nodded along in a reluctant, half-questioning manner. “Do you think a potato would still taste good if you took a bite of it raw?”

“Huh?! What do I look like, a horse or a deer?! I’m not going to do that! It’d do nothing but give me the runs!”

“That’s what I figured.”

Leelee cast a dubious glance at her mistress as she covered her mouth with her hands and giggled. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just reflecting on how kind His Highness can be. I believed him for three whole years, you know.”

“Huh? I haven’t the slightest clue what you’re talking about.”

Ignoring how her court lady was squinting at her, the headscarf-wearing Maiden continued to chuckle to herself. Just as Kenshoo’s surreptitious laughter had melted into the sky on that starry night, her laughter as light as a bell’s tinkle echoed throughout the summer garden.

Afterword

HELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. Many thanks for picking up Volume 2.

Given how the first volume ended, I rushed to get the sequel out as fast as possible. Both the first switch and “her” plot reach a conclusion in this volume. I hope you all found it to be a satisfying one. Yes, you heard me—the *first* switch. Thanks to your support, *Inept Villainess* has been greenlit for a third volume and beyond!

Everything from this point onward will be completely original content that’s never been published on the web. I also plan on expanding the setting past the Maiden Court to present you a more exciting and profound story than ever before. Look forward to lots of Gyomei and Shin-u too! Uh, see, I’m worried that if I don’t promise that now, all their screen time will get eaten up by Reirin’s nerves of steel.

As an aside, my supervisor told me that the page numbers worked out so that I could write a sixteen-page afterword if I wanted, but I figured my readers would prefer to read a second short story and went with that plan instead. The “extra” happens to be a revised version of a story I posted on the web, but I hope you all enjoyed it.

I would once again like to thank my editor for always letting me run wild. Special thanks to Kana Yuki-sensei for the lovely illustrations, Ei Ohitsuji-sensei for handling the wonderful manga adaptation, my designer, and all of my dear readers.

Let’s meet again in Volume 3.

—Satsuki Nakamura, June 2021



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